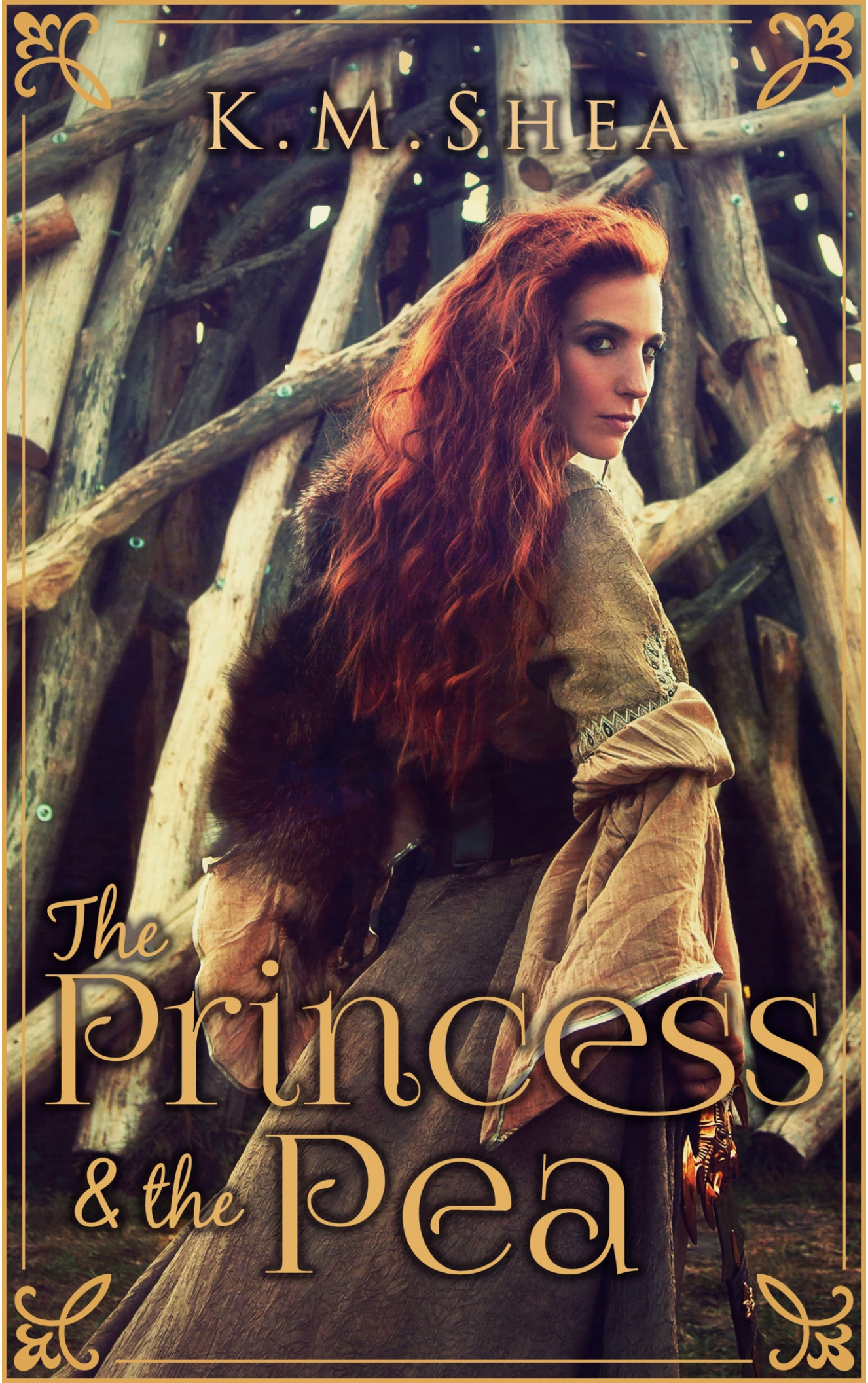
K.M. SHEA
The Princess & the Pea

THE PRINCESS AND THE PEA

K. M. SHEA

PRINCESS AND THE PEA

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CONTENTS

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Epilogue
Timeless Fairy Tales: Beauty and the Beast Excerpt
Afterword
Other books by K. M. Shea

CHAPTER 1

Torrens was often described as a pleasant country with quaint forests, rolling hills, and beautiful lakes. Lis didn't see what was so great about it given that, as pretty as it was, the country was apparently a hotbed of thieves, thugs, and other unsavory characters.

Lis—"Lisheva" when she couldn't avoid it—parried a blow from one brigand and mule-kicked the second one that was attempting to sneak up behind her. Her heel connected with the man's knee, and down he went, leaving her to face off with the bandit holding a poorly forged sword.

"We need to capture one of these men, Vorah," Lis called out to her companion as she ducked her opponent's wide—and uncontrolled—upper slice. When the bandit had to twist to keep from cutting himself with his own sword, Lis struck, ramming her shoulder into his gut. He staggered, and Lis slammed the heel of her palm into his nose, breaking it with practiced efficiency.

The brigand dropped his crude sword in his pain, which Lis kicked away. He recovered faster than expected, though, and swung wildly at her with his fists, aiming for her throat.

Lis side-stepped him, then rammed her elbow between his shoulder blades. He fell on top of his fellow bandit, who had been in the process of peeling himself off the ground, with a thud and a great deal of swearing.

Wiping sweat from her brow, Lis continued—unbothered by the confrontation. "I want to question one of them. There's no reason for all these attacks, and I refuse to travel blindly through this wretched country any longer."

"'Don't kill them all'—understood, Master!" Vorah chirped. Her bright orange-red hair made her easy to find, as it practically glowed in the gloom of the forest.

Lis' left eyebrow twitched. "I'm not your master."

"Sure you are, Master," Vorah said in the soothing tone she used on her mare during a thunderstorm. She lunged forward, looping the thin but incredibly strong metal chain that connected her daggers around the neck of a third bandit that was stupid enough to put his back to her, and pulled.

The bandit made a choking noise as Vorah brutally yanked him off his feet.

"It is a compliment, *Master*. I acknowledge you are far more skilled than I am—as you have demonstrated—and I have much to learn from you," Vorah continued.

At the continued use of the title, Lis flattened her lips and held in a growl—which would only serve as encouragement. Instead, she swung back around to face the two brigands she had knocked over. The top one had struggled to his knees.

Using the hilt of her sword, Lis popped him at the base of the skull as she walked past, making him collapse on his compatriot again.

"I often wonder how different my life would be if I had been smart enough to flee after beating you." Lis descended on a fourth bandit who was struggling with a wicked-looking crossbow he very obviously did not know how to use.

She approached him from the side—she did *not* want him loosening the loaded bolt into her stomach out of sheer luck—and hip-checked him to make him stumble.

The motion made his head rise, giving Lis the perfect chance to jab him in the eye with her thumb.

The bandit yelped, dropped his crossbow (which did not go off as Lis feared it might), and slapped his hands to his watering eye.

Shifting her weight onto her left leg, Lis took advantage of his unprotected torso and smashed the hilt of her sword into his right side while she drove the knee of her right leg into his gut.

He flew backwards, as if she had hit him with a battering ram.

“If I had not joined you two years ago, I am certain your life would be far less fulfilling.” Vorah now had the fifth—and final—bandit tangled in the chain of her daggers. His hands bound, he was unable to do more than whimper and attempt to duck when she drove the heel of her foot into his jaw in a kick she copied off Lis.

Lis shook her head and turned to face the would-be-crossbow-wielder.

He had produced a knife from some pocket of his dark and dirty clothes and held it out in front of him. An ugly expression twitched on his face as he snarled at her. He jabbed the blade forward, aiming for her shoulder.

Lis automatically deflected the blow, raising her forearm and smashing it against his to make his strike go wide.

It didn’t miss her entirely—the thin blade hit the edge of her shoulder in a glancing blow that skipped over her chainmail hauberk. It did no damage at all—her chainmail was too good for that—but it still made Lis frown in displeasure.

Too sloppy, she thought grimly. *Just because these men are less skilled than the others who have attacked us on our journey does not excuse a poor defense.*

Readjusting so she once again held her sword with two hands, she smashed the flat of her blade down on the brigand’s knuckles. Next, she leaned into him and kicked at his right leg so his stance was too wide to be stable, and she finished him off by driving the hilt of her sword into his chin.

He slumped and hit the floor with a muted thump.

“Hold onto that one, Master!” Vorah called. Her usually carefree voice was colored with irritation. “They’re getting away!”

Lis caught sight of Vorah’s opponents fleeing through the underbrush.

The two Lis had downed were having a harder time making a run for it. Not because Lis had inflicted more damage, but because Lis’ and Vorah’s mares stood between the bandits and the escape route their friends had taken.

The bloodthirsty horses reared and snorted in warning.

Cursing, the men ran in the opposite direction.

“Don’t worry—one of ‘em has a limp. He’ll be a cinch to track.” Vorah started to trot after them, a sly smile twitching across her lips.

“I wouldn’t bother.” Lis stabbed her sword into the ground, pinning the last remaining man by his tunic. “We only need *one*.”

“I don’t know nothing!” the bandit wheezed as the women turned their attention to him.

“That’s a terrible lie.” Vorah sighed in disappointment as she looped the chain of her daggers around his wrists and pulled tight, restraining him. “You should at least *attempt* to come up with something believable.”

Lis pulled her hunting knife from her leather boot and stared at it. “Why are you targeting us?”

“Not targeting you at all,” the bandit sneered. “You just looked like an easy mark.”

Lis flicked her knife. It impaled the ground so close to his leg it cut through the worn material of his trousers. “Lie again, and next time it will be your leg.”

“We knew you’d be traveling to Mersey,” he blurted out, naming the capital of Torrens. “Our leader told us to stop you afore you reached it, Warrior Princess.”

A long-suffering sigh leaked out of Lis at the sound of her disliked—and unwanted—nickname, but she cut it short. *I have more important concerns to address than my idiotic nickname.* “Then the men that attacked us previously are all part of your band?” she guessed.

The bandit scowled, but he nodded when Vorah tugged on her chain, making him lurch forward. “Yeah.”

“That’s fair strange.” Vorah tapped the blades of her daggers together. “You’re famous, Master, but we’ve never been so openly—nor stubbornly—attacked before due to your skills.”

Lis thoughtfully plucked her knife from the ground. “Perhaps…” She rolled the blade across her fingers, making

sure the bandit's eyes stayed on the knife. "Tell me, did your leader say *why* you were to attack us?"

"Nah, just that we had to stop you so as you couldn't reach King Albion," the bandit said.

Lis nearly dropped her knife in surprise and exchanged a look with Vorah.

"Did your leader say why he thought we were going to Torrens to meet with the king?" Vorah asked.

The bandit gave Vorah a withering glare. "Pro'ly because your next contract is with him, ain't it?" he scoffed.

Lis narrowed her eyes. *It's more troubling that this ring of thieves knows about our contract than that we've been targeted. The king's messenger found us in the country of Loire when he offered us a contract, and we told no one of the job. We haven't even agreed to it, yet, as the messenger was more of a summons than a detailed description of our duties.... So how does a leader of bandits have nearly as much information about this assignment as we do?*

"Who is your leader?" Lis asked.

The bandit shrugged. "Never met him. Just receive orders and do what I'm told."

Vorah and Lis continued questioning the bandit for at least half an hour, until Lis was about ready to strangle the unhelpful man. (He really didn't know much at all, mostly because he unquestioningly followed his leader and lacked any significant cunning streak.)

Once it was clear they weren't going to get anything more useful out of him, Vorah smiled widely.

"So, what should we do with him? The usual?" she asked.

Lis nodded. "The usual," she agreed.

Vorah stabbed her daggers into the ground. "I'll get the rope!" she said gleefully. She hopped up and hurried for her mare, leaving Lis to stand guard.

Lis plucked the daggers up with a sigh—it was never wise to leave weapons around a captive—and called after her. "Remember the berries."

The bandit squinted up at her. “Berries?”

“WAIT, stop! You can’t leave me like this!” the bandit yelped.

Lis twisted in the saddle and glanced back at their captive.

They had left the bandit tied to a tree…stripped of everything but his underclothes and painted liberally with smashed berries that dripped juice down his body.

“Ouch!” he yelped. “No—get off!”

Ahhh, yes, the ants found him already. Satisfied with the unusual punishment, Lis returned her attention to the road as they started their journey. Again.

Vorah sighed over the impressively loud curses the bandit shouted. “I do love the painful brilliance of it, but what a waste of good food,” she said.

Lis shrugged. “It’s not a waste if the ants get it. Besides, eat enough of those, and they’ll make you sick,” she said. “It’s easier than dragging him along behind us to hand over to the guards in Mersey.”

“We could have just *killed* him,” Vorah pointed out.

Lis pushed a few curls of her dark brown hair out of her face. “He’s a small-time crook. Death is too harsh.”

“But give him a few more minutes of being nibbled on by ants, and he’ll realize the rope is frayed and break free—if his friends don’t return for him,” Vorah pointed out. “We could have given him a lesson slightly more…*permanent*.”

“I’m a warrior, not a vigilante,” Lis said. “I’m not going to needlessly spill blood and birth grudges.”

Vorah relaxed into a smile. “I know, Master. I just like hearing you confirm it! I have to applaud you, though; it’s a ruthless and painful punishment. I’m sure neither he—nor whatever unfortunate soul who finds his bare arse—will easily forget it!” She cackled as she wiggled in the saddle.

Her mare bore her squirming with patience and continued down the road, walking shoulder-to-shoulder with Lis' mount.

"It bothers me that the bandits knew we were coming," Lis said when Vorah finished laughing.

Vorah peered up at the cloudy sky. "It does seem shady. Do you think King Albion announced his intent to hire you?"

"Possibly, but I'm guessing not. If the brigand's words can be trusted, we have been targeted by a single pack of outlaws," Lis said. "That means somehow their leader found out, but no one else has."

Vorah caressed the chain of her daggers—which were now strapped to her belt. "Which means the palace likely has a few informants living in it?"

Lis nodded when she noticed the younger woman was glancing her way. "That's the most likely reason. And if it's true, it spawns additional inferences."

"For instance?"

A faint peal of thunder rumbled dully in the distance. *Is it going to rain?* Lis adjusted her horse's reins. "If this brigand leader hasn't told anyone else that we're coming, it likely means he believes he can profit most if we don't arrive *and* if no one else knows about our contract."

Instead of frightening Lis, the thought intrigued her. She wasn't a warrior for the money—it would be a poor profession to choose if that were so—or even the fame. Though there were many aspects of her position she enjoyed, chief among them was her love to fight and her special love of challenges. *And it seems like that is exactly what this new contract will be.*

"I guess we'll find out soon—we're on schedule to arrive in Mersey tonight. But it makes you wonder, doesn't it?"

"About what?"

"What the king is going to have us do, of course," Vorah said.

Lis smiled. "It does."

CHAPTER 2

Water dripped from Lis' chainmail and dark hair. Her leather boots—which were designed for silence—squeaked at an irritatingly *loud* volume as she and an equally soaked Vorah followed the chamberlain through the palace halls. Thunder boomed, and even safely inside the thick stone walls of Mersey, Lis could hear the steady downpour of rain.

"Almost there," the chamberlain said with a polite smile. "King Albion will be delighted to receive you."

A frown briefly settled on Lis' lips. *I'm rather surprised we weren't taken to our quarters first—or at the very least dried so we don't resemble drowned rats.*

Her armor and sword would survive—she had them enchanted by a craftmage a year ago when she finally had the funds to afford a charm for rust and ruin resistance. Her boots, however, were another story…

I only owned this pair for a year, she thought sorrowfully. *Must I go through boots at the same rate a noble woman goes through dresses? They're painfully expensive!*

Lis banished her likely ruined and squeaky boots from her mind when the chamberlain reached the end of the hallway and flung open an impressive set of carved double doors.

"His Majesty, King Albion, ruler of Torrens and protector of the lands!" the chamberlain announced as he stepped to the side and bowed. "The warriors Lisheva and Vorah have arrived, Your Majesty."

Lis stepped into the room—which appeared to be a feasting hall of sorts given the dizzying number of tables and benches stuffed inside.

Besides a small smattering of guards posted at the perimeter of the room, the only occupant was a short, squat man seated at

a table. Though his hair was a distinguished salt-and-pepper gray and his beard was carefully trimmed, he wore a smile that was rather *bright*, Lis imagined, for the "protector of the lands." The king—for he could be no one else—tilted his head, making the jewels of his crown glitter. "They're here? Splendid! Come in—and sit down."

The king motioned for them to take up a spot on the bench across from him.

Lis and Vorah exchanged raised eyebrows before they made their way to the king, leaving little puddles in their wakes.

"Good heavens, you're drenched," King Albion exclaimed when they reached his table. "Chamberlain, bring some towels for my guests. And summon Channing—he ought to be here," he added.

The chamberlain bowed. "Of course, Your Majesty." He closed the door behind him with a clunk that echoed in the large room.

"Terrible weather, isn't it?" King Albion asked.

"Perhaps, Your Majesty," Lis said politely as the faint growl of thunder made the castle shudder.

King Albion nodded. "It's a poor night to welcome you to Mersey. Cheese?" He held out the plate of white cheeses he had been snacking on.

Lis stared at the king as Vorah delicately scratched her nose to hide her grin.

The King of Torrens is the first royal I've met, so I cannot say this with certainty…but I don't believe this is how kings are supposed to act.

"No, thank you, Your Majesty."

"Are you certain? It's very good cheese," King Albion said.

"Well…" Vorah said.

"We're certain," Lis firmly replied.

The great doors opened, and Lis turned around to watch a female servant carrying an armload of colorfully dyed bath towels.

“Thank you,” Lis murmured and took two when the servant offered them to her and Vorah. *It seems improperly informal to dry off in front of royalty.* She glanced at the king—trying to gauge his reaction.

The king was once again grazing from his cheese platter and seemed generally unconcerned.

Lis reluctantly spread a towel across her shoulders to catch water from the sopping tresses of her curly hair, then tried to discreetly rub down some of the more expensive pieces of her traveling armor.

“Well, now that you aren’t in danger of catching a chill, welcome, Warrior Princess and her student, to Mersey!” King Albion smiled as he looked back and forth between Lis and Vorah. “My instincts tell me…*you* are the Warrior Princess?” He cocked his head as he addressed Lis.

Lis dried off the hilt of her sword and keenly felt the cheekiness of her nickname as she sat before *real* royalty. “It is an unfortunate nickname, Your Majesty.”

“One she earned,” Vorah managed to say before Lis sharply elbowed her.

“Then that must make you her student?” King Albion asked as he fixed his curious gaze on Vorah.

“Indeed, I am,” Vorah said proudly. “Vorah, at your service, Your Majesty.”

King Albion leaned forward on his elbows. “And how did you come to apprentice to the Warrior Princess Lisheva?”

Vorah also leaned forward, making her dusting of freckles glow in the firelight. “I challenged her to a fight two years ago when she was passing through Ringsted. She was already famous by then, and I foolishly thought I could best her and earn recognition for myself.”

“Vorah,” Lis hissed and was thoroughly ignored.

“She knocked me unconscious in two minutes!” Vorah said proudly. “When I finally came around, I knew I had much to learn, and Lisheva the Warrior Princess would be the best sort of teacher.”

“It is admirable of both of you,” King Albion said. “Lisheva for her skill, and you, Vorah, for your acceptance of your loss and your intelligence in becoming the student of the one who had the strength to defeat you!”

“She is not really my student, Your Majesty,” Lis was quick to insert.

Vorah shook her head. “I am in every way,” she said with false humility as she built upon her act and gave Lis a gaze that was worshipful.

Lis ignored her. *If she had not become such a good friend and proven herself in combat, I would have left her story-telling, empty-headed act months ago.*

King Albion laughed. “It has been said you can best judge a man by the people who follow him. Based on your companion, I think I chose well in hiring you, Warrior Princess.” He returned his gaze to her, and a small smile settled on his lips. “I look forward to introducing you to my son. I believe you would be a good match for him!”

Lis stared at the king as her hair still dripped with water and her boots squeaked and sloshed. Never before had she more closely resembled a wet rat, and the king thought she would be a “good match?” *Perhaps it is a custom in Torrens to joke with guests?* Lis thought desperately. *A king really would not act in such a way—even in my homeland of Baris, the birthplace of informality!*

“He is such a shy boy,” King Albion continued. “He needs a strong woman—like yourself—to protect him, you know. A true princess.”

“My title of Warrior Princess is but a poor joke, Your Majesty, meant to mock my gender,” Lis said. “I am not of royal birth.”

King Albion squinted at her. “What does royal birth have to do with being a princess?”

Only everything? Lis glanced at Vorah and was glad to see her friend was also taken aback—though it was only noticeable by the slant of her eyebrows.

Clearing her throat, Lis ventured, “Is that not what it means to be a princess? To be born into nobility?”

King Albion snorted. “Load of posh,” he said. “To be a true princess requires valiance, honor, bravery, and sensitivity to your people.” He raised his eyebrows and studied Lis as if he could discern the state of her soul. “Are *you* sensitive? If so, perhaps you really ought to marry Channing after all.”

Desperate to change the topic, Lis awkwardly cleared her throat. “You have not yet told us what sort of contract you are offering, Your Majesty.”

“Ahhh, yes. We must wait until Channing appears, I’m afraid. But in the interim, why don’t you tell me of your various exploits as a fighter?” King Albion folded his hands on the table and smiled cheerfully. “I’m sure it must be a fascinating story, for there are not many female warriors, and both of you are known to be among the best of either gender!”

Lis opened and closed her mouth, far more disquieted by the king’s informality than she had ever been by any physical opponent.

Vorah, apparently, shared no such hesitation. “My master first rose to prominence in her home country of Baris,” she announced as she leaned against the table, her eyes bright. “Once she mastered the sword, she began traveling and gained a reputation for fighting—and beating—anyone who challenged her, though she was also known to aid cities and people upon request.”

“Yes, Channing once saw her fighting a goblin pack that was bothering an Erlauf mountain town—it’s how we decided upon your master for this important contract,” King Albion gossiped.

Behind Lis, the feasting hall doors opened again. “Prince Channing,” the Chamberlain announced.

“Wonderful! Channing, come in, my boy! Did you already send word to your mother? Perfect!” King Albion laughed and slapped the smooth, polished surface of the table.

Lis stood so she could bow to the prince, but when she turned to face him, she almost lost control of her emotionless

expression and gawked.

Prince Channing was everything his father was not: Tall, limber, broad through the shoulders, and dressed in chainmail and armor. His face was handsome and princely, though his features looked like they had been chiseled in rock, and he lacked King Albion's deep smile lines. Though his hair was a pretty russet brown color, it was cut the no-nonsense straight cut that seemed universal to all warriors who embraced rigid simplicity. And his eyes were an unusual shade of honey brown that could have mistakenly been called gold in the firelight.

This is the "boy" who needs a strong woman to protect him?!

"Your Majesty," Vorah politely inquired. "Do you have problems with your sight?"

"Eh?" King Albion blinked.

Lis rushed to speak before Vorah could shoot off her mouth. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Your Highness," she said as she bowed.

Prince Channing nodded once as he walked around the table—his footsteps surprisingly light for one as tall and muscled as he—and took up a position at his father's right side.

"Channing, you recognize Lisheva and her lovely student, Vorah, don't you?" Without waiting for a reply, the king continued. "And now we can begin to discuss the matter of your contract, Warrior Princess."

Lis' mouth twitched in a frown before she smoothed it over. *I wish he would stop using that ridiculous nickname.* "Yes, please."

"We called you here to request that you protect one of our country's famed treasures. Though we've kept it in these halls safely for the past decade, it was only recently discovered that it is of a great deal more value than originally estimated, due to the nature of the charms imbedded in it," King Albion said.

"What treasure are you referring to?" Lis asked.

"A gem: The Pea of Primeorder." Prince Channing's voice was deep and a little rough—like the choppy waters of white-water rapids.

Vorah blinked. “I’m sorry…did you say the *Pea* of Primeorder?”

King Albion chuckled ruefully. “He did.”

“It is called so because of the jewel’s deep green color,” Channing said.

“And because the wizard who originally made it was a regular peabrain,” King Albion added.

“You said it was enchanted. What is it capable of?” Lis asked.

“The Pea of Primeorder bears a number of simple charms—a heat charm, a charm to resist water, and even a spell to make you sing on key at all times,” King Albion said. “Ingenious, I say—and it is possible only because of the size and purity of the jewel!”

“The charms are little more than afterthoughts,” Channing said, proving to be far more focused than his father. As King Albion thoughtfully tapped his lower lip and furrowed his brow, Channing was as blank-faced as Lis. “The jewel’s real potential is in the magic stocked within it. In recently rediscovered ancient texts that record nearly as far back as the time of the Snow Queen of Verglas, it is explained that the jewel actually serves as a magical storehouse of sorts. It contains all the magic of an extremely powerful sorceress who had abused her magic for dark purposes,” the king said.

Vorah whistled; Lis frowned. “How is that possible?” she asked.

King Albion combed his fingers through his beard. “That long ago, the practice of sealing the magic of a rogue mage was not yet invented. Instead, they would remove the magic user’s powers and imbed them in an object. That is what was done to this particular sorceress—her powers were placed in the Pea of Primeorder. Having magic available at your fingertips makes the Pea a temptation, certainly, but given that this rogue sorceress was extremely powerful—she likely would be considered a Lady Enchanter by current conventions—means the jewel is worth a great deal and could be terribly used or abused.”

“Yep, that would make the jewel a prime target.” Vorah nodded as she drummed her fingers on the table.

“This rediscovery of its powers is why you require our assistance?” Lis asked.

King Albion nodded eagerly. “Since we have uncovered this information, the Pea has been targeted. In this month alone, our castle has been breached by brigands three times.”

Three times? Lis rubbed her sword’s scabbard with a thumb as she thought. *That’s quite bad—particularly when guarding such an explosively powerful item.*

Prince Channing’s golden eyes glittered as he frowned at his father. “We are working to find the source of the holes in our security.”

“Do many know of the…Pea of Primeorder’s true purpose?” Lis asked.

“We have tried to keep the discovery hushed.” Channing rubbed his jaw—finally proving he wasn’t merely a statue capable of speech. “But while we have managed to keep the exact powers a secret, it seems news of the jewel’s increase in worth has spread.”

Thinking of the bandit ring that had harried her and Vorah during their journey, Lis thoughtfully pursed her lips. “Do you know if multiple groups of bandits have learned of it, or if it is merely one?”

“We haven’t been able to catch any of the rogues, so I’m afraid we don’t know.” King Albion sighed. “But we assumed it has been targeted by multiple groups. Particularly given we just received a notice from the legendary thief, Apex, not five days ago.”

“Apex…is he not the thief famous for stealing long-lost treasures of Torrens?” Vorah asked.

“Indeed,” Lis said as she studied the guards, trying to gauge their skill. “We heard of him when we traveled through Sole; he stole a famous painting by a Torrens artist from a local lord.”

“You do not seem overly worried about him,” King Albion said.

Lis shrugged marginally. “You said he left a notice?”

“A letter, informing us he would soon steal the Pea of Primeorder, yes,” King Albion said.

“Do you know what sort of thief sends a *notice*?” Lis asked.

Prince Channing raised an eyebrow—which managed to make him look scornful *and* unimpressed. “A legendary one.”

“No, a very poor one,” Lis said.

King Albion had been in the process of eating another piece of cheese, which he choked on and wheezed—though it almost sounded like laughter.

Prince Channing frowned.

“You don’t say?” King Albion asked mildly after he recovered.

“Sending a notice means he is not merely content to take the item; he wants public praise and admiration for his ‘daring’ feat, which is nothing but common thievery,” Lis said.

“He is known to steal only from rich lords,” Prince Channing pointed out.

Lis raised her eyebrows. “Naturally, only rich lords could afford to own treasure.” She tapped the hilt of her sword as she once again glanced at the soldiers.

We’ve seen a fair number of guards since we entered Mersey, but if they are terrible at their job, they will be more of a hinderance than a help.

Ruthlessly, she continued. “In addition to obviously selfish and prideful motivations, he is sloppy at his chosen career. Daring thieves who love their infamy leave something to identify their work by. Apex sends notice before his jobs, making it far easier to catch him.”

“But none have caught him yet,” King Albion said.

Vorah rested her hands on the table. “How many lords have done more besides consolidate their forces as if preparing to face an army? A single thief is not an army to be overwhelmed by numbers, Your Majesty.”

Lis smiled slightly. “Well said.”

Vorah grinned. “I was taught by the best, Master!”

Lis grunted. “I didn’t teach you *that*.”

“It came as an epiphany to me when I was considering your character one fine morning,” Vorah joked.

Lis ignored her. “My companion is correct. Catching a single thief involves a different tactic than most have used, which is why he has evaded capture thus far. But I am far more concerned about the previous break-ins to your palace than Apex. What have you changed since then?”

King Albion beckoned at his offspring with a piece of cheese. “Channing?”

Channing folded his hands behind his back in a stance that looked military trained. “We’ve increased the number of guards on duty, changed their patrol patterns and rotations weekly—on different days to remain unpredictable—and increased security at the Mersey city gates.”

“Have you hired any new guards?” Vorah asked.

“No.” Channing shifted slightly. “Given the nature of our enemy, now is not an ideal time to welcome unknown guards into the ranks, as we cannot be certain they are not one of the bandits.”

*That’s understandable—particularly given that they **must** have a bandit informant somewhere in their castle, but citizen loyalty is not my business.*

“What other warriors or mercenaries have you hired?” Lis asked.

“Only you,” King Albion said.

“Pardon?” Lis politely inquired—though she wanted to gape at the king.

After three separate castle breaches and an unknown number of bandits drooling after the gem, they hire TWO warriors to guard the thing?

“We’ve only sought out the two of you,” King Albion said.

“But you intend to hire more, right?” Vorah asked.

King Albion ate another piece of cheese. “I wasn’t particularly planning on it, no.” He offered his plate to his son, who shook his head in silent refusal.

Lis briskly stood. “Then I’m afraid I will have to refuse the contract. Though Vorah and I are both skilled, properly protecting the Pea of Primeorder would require *many* more warriors just as talented as Vorah and I, if not more so. Perhaps you should seek help from the Verglas Assassins’ Guild.”

Channing slightly narrowed his eyes. “I thought you said you were not concerned about Apex.”

“Apex is not the only foe you face,” Lis said. “And while I am certain Vorah and I are all that is needed in order to fend *him* off, I cannot say the same for the rest of the bandits that will certainly make another attempt on Mersey castle, nor can the two of us properly patch the holes in your security.”

In particular, I am not capable of rooting out your mole and disposing of him.

“But that is perfect!” King Albion said. “If you two warriors fend off Apex, we’ll handle the rest. Channing is already working on tightening up our defenses. Apex is truly our main concern. If you can fend him off and buy us even a little time to prepare against the other bandits, that will be exactly what we need! With your abrupt entrance, it is unlikely the bandits will rush to attack. By the time they’ve adjusted their plans to include the two of you, you can be off on your merry way.”

It was a good point—the bandits that had hurried to attack them on the road obviously knew it would be far more difficult to stop them once they reached Mersey. Still…Lis pressed her lips together and glanced at Vorah.

Vorah scratched at her nose and discreetly shook her head, though she said for show, “Your call, Master.”

Lis opened her mouth to refuse when Prince Channing took a step towards the table.

“We can adjust your contract to stipulate a shorter amount of time,” the prince said. “Apex is likely to strike soon, and we don’t need much time to address the problems with our security. We will, of course, double your usual rate,” he said.

Lis shut her mouth with a snap. *They give us a short job and double our pay? It’s too good of a deal to pass up on…*

suspiciously so. It feels like they are overly eager to hire us for a task that shouldn't be difficult if they planned correctly.

Lis once again glanced at Vorah, who was now scrunching her nose, making her freckles brighter than usual. When she met her gaze, Vorah shrugged. "Seems like an easy job, Master."

"…Then I suppose we have no reason to refuse," Lis said reluctantly.

"Excellent!" King Albion laughed and wiped his fingers off on his fine robe. "My wife should arrive soon—she'll have both the jewel and the contract with her. As long as you protect the jewel, you'll stay here in Mersey—in the palace with us, naturally!"

"Naturally," Lis murmured. She glanced at Prince Channing, still trying to get a read on him.

When the prince met her gaze, he put a small but sincere smile on his lips. "We are pleased you have agreed to our request."

If he was so offended by our disregard of Apex, why does he seem truly happy to have us stay on?

When the door opened again, Lis twisted around to peer behind her, then stood when she saw a lovely woman who surely had to be Queen Theodora.

The queen was elegant and beautiful. She had the same copper-toned hair as Channing, though her eyes were gray, and she was tall and slender, like a flower.

Trailing after the queen was a young man who was approximately the prince's age—in the early years of his twenties—though he wore a friendly smile that made his eyes twinkle. He carried a stack of papers in one hand and bore a velvet pillow in the other.

"Welcome, Lisheva and Vorah," the queen said, surprising Lis when she correctly addressed them, looking at each of them with their proper name. "You can't imagine how glad we are that you have agreed to help us."

"Here it is, the Pea of Primeorder!" King Albion took the pillow from the handsome servant with a smile. "Thank you,

Haywood. If you would put the contracts on the table, please."

"Of course, Your Majesty," the man, Haywood, said in a sing-song voice.

King Albion offered the pillow out to Lis and Vorah. When they leaned towards the pillow, he beamed. "Go ahead and take it—pick it up! If you are to guard it from Apex, you'll need to handle the Pea."

Vorah raised an eyebrow. "Knowing what it contains doesn't make me all that eager to touch it," she said.

Lis paused, then picked up the spherical gem—which was round and bigger than her thumbnail. It was cool to the touch, but strangely textured due to the cut of the jewel—done to make it sparkle just so.

As Channing had said, the jewel was a yellow-y shade of green. It did resemble a pea, but there was an extra glitter to it that a normal jewel didn't possess.

Magic.

Lis carefully rolled it around in her hand, getting used to its weight. "Where do you plan to keep it for the duration of our contract?" Lis asked, already puzzling out how she and Vorah would trade off shifts and breaks.

King Albion tilted his head. "Why, with you, of course!"

Lis blinked. "I don't understand."

Prince Channing looked up from organizing the contract pages with Haywood. "We thought it would be easiest for you to keep it on your person."

Lis held the jewel in her palm. "Oh?"

Next to her, Vorah cleared her throat to mask her snort of disbelief.

Is the royal family countrified and have no idea how most of civilization works, or are they merely that trusting?

Though Lis and Vorah were being paid to protect the gem, there were any number of ways for them to turn a higher profit by taking the jewel for themselves, swapping it out for a fake, etc. Lis would never do such a thing—it would be cowardly and

dishonorable—and neither would Vorah, but the royal family couldn't know that…could they?

They are too intelligent to be that dull-minded. Prince Channing, at the very least, seems like he could eat bandits with his luncheon. But why would they trust us to strut around with something so important, then?

When Lis glanced at Prince Channing, he offered her that small, pleasant smile again.

There's definitely something deeper going on.

"Very well," Lis said. "Then if we could adjust the contract…"

"Yes, yes, of course!" King Albion beamed. "Originally, we planned to ask you on for a month and a half, but three weeks will give us the time we need—and will mean you are present when Apex strikes, for he promised to do so within the week. Is that satisfactory to you?"

"Yes." Lis glanced at the gem before passing it over to Vorah.

"Excellent! Haywood—fetch us some ink, would you?"

Haywood bowed. "Yes, Your Majesty!"

"And check with the housekeeper what rooms our fine guests will be staying in," King Albion called after the servant. "When all this paper business is over, I'd like you to take them to their rooms."

Haywood smiled cheekily. "With *pleasure*, Your Majesty," he said before he darted from the room.

"We thank you for your service," Queen Theodora said in her melodic voice.

Lis and Vorah bowed in sync. "We will strive with every ounce of our skill and strength to keep our contract and not betray the trust you have placed in us," they said together—as they did with every contract to which they agreed.

When Lis straightened up, she noticed Prince Channing was studying her, his head tilted slightly. When he caught her gaze he nodded, then shifted to face his father.

A very strange royal family indeed…

CHAPTER 3

"They have got to rename this thing," Vorah announced to her audience of Lis and books as she held the Pea of Primeorder above her head and squinted into its green depths. "It's just about the worst name I've heard."

Lis didn't stir from where she leaned against the library wall and stared out of a window and into the busy trickle of people that passed through the gated wall that separated the royal palace from the rest of Mersey. As the foul weather had eased, folks were finally out and about again—though the sun was starting to set, and long shadows stretched across the courtyard. "Perhaps it is so named to mislead those who would like to steal such a thing."

"A pea is just about one of the lowest food items you could compare a jewel to," Vorah agreed. She was splayed out in an armchair—one leg hooked over an armrest. "So, what's the plan?"

Lis finally turned away from the window and studied the silent library.

It was beautiful—filled with scrolls and leather-bound books—and welcoming. Sunbeams streamed in through the many windows, and it was filled with the comforting smell of paper. But it was also filled with treasures of another kind: instruments.

Lis carefully wound her way past a harp that was taller than herself and paused to glance at a violin that was a deep cherry-brown color. "We keep the jewel on us and rotate day shifts."

Vorah stood and stretched like a cat before she joined Lis in inspecting the violin, subtly passing the jewel when their arms brushed. "And at night?"

Lis tucked the jewel in a leather pouch attached to her belt. “We stay together.”

“That’s why you rejected our private rooms and asked for shared quarters?” Vorah asked.

“Apex traditionally strikes at night,” Lis said. “While we need to always be on our guard, at night we must especially be aware.”

Vorah nodded. “That shouldn’t be a problem. Are we going to stay up all night?”

Lis pressed her lips together. “We can take shifts, but my foremost concern is properly preparing the room to make a quiet heist impossible.”

“True. Especially if you choose a good spot to store it during the night hours,” Vorah said.

Lis swiveled so she could face her friend. “Any ideas?”

Vorah rested her hand on a bookshelf. “I was thinking under your mattress.”

Lis thoughtfully frowned as she considered the idea.

Normally, such a spot would be an asinine recommendation, but Vorah and Lis were unusual in that they were female warriors who lived by the sword. Not to mention Apex was a seasoned thief.

The few jewels Apex had stolen were all taken straight off their owners. Most people assumed that if the gem wasn’t surrounded by guards, the next safest place would be to have it secured out in the open, to their person.

Hiding the jewel under the mattress would throw up another blockade to keep Apex from pulling the heist. But more importantly, it would give Lis and Vorah a serious edge.

As female fighters, Lis and Vorah were used to facing opponents who were in some way superior. As women, it was nearly impossible for them to match the strength of a male opponent, and while in some cases they could pull off superior speed, the easiest path to winning dealt in the battle of the mind.

Years of fighting had trained Lis to react faster, to be able to accurately predict what sort of moves she could expect, and to even be *aware* of her opponent—their presence, the holes in their defense, their strengths, etc.

In battle, anything from a slight shift of an enemy's weight to a minute difference in the angle at which they held their sword could mean victory or defeat.

No matter how quiet Apex was, when presented with a bedroom in which there was no window and only one entrance, he could not possibly enter the room without awakening either Lis or Vorah—particularly not when they had the room booby-trapped to make noise *and* if he had to physically reach **under** Lis to dig the Pea out.

"It's a good idea," Lis said. "And it just might be our best option."

"It will be an unexpected hiding place," Vorah said with a bit of smugness. "And also offers a location that will play off your sensitivity."

Lis raised an eyebrow. "Hopefully we are not overestimating our awareness and skills."

Vorah snorted and leaned against the bookshelf. "Even blindfolded you can feel if your horse's walk is off. This should be playing to your strengths."

"And yours," Lis said. "You have better hearing than I do, so you ought to go in the bed closest to the door."

"I'm game!" Vorah pushed off the bookshelf and passed a table of books, caressing the spines with her hands as she passed. "Is our goal to run him off or capture him? Apex, I mean."

"Capture." Lis scowled. "I don't want to risk him coming back—and he *deserves* to be jailed."

Vorah grinned. "You don't like him, do you?"

"I dislike any criminal that people like to paint as a hero." Lis returned to her post by the window with a sigh.

Vorah laughed outright. "Your sense of justice strikes again! But if you want to capture him, that means we'll need to lure

him into coming all the way into the room. So, in addition to taking watch shifts, whoever is awake needs to *pretend* to be asleep?"

Lis nodded. "Yes. This Apex is proud. Pride makes one careless. We'll play off that so he believes we are an easy mark—like all his previous jobs."

Vorah twirled a lock of wavy red hair as she narrowed her eyes. "I agree, but this job *isn't* like all of his previous ones."

Lis could hear the faint hum of the chatter from those outside the castle walls through the thin windowpane. "In what way?"

"It's in Torrens. This Apex fellow has made a name for himself robbing small-time lords—who are usually known for being crooked. But he's always recovering treasures of Torrens from *outside* Torrens," Vorah said.

As Lis watched, Haywood—the handsome male servant who had shown Lis and Vorah around the castle—trotted outside. He laughed and waved to a number of folk who all greeted him with warm smiles.

"This is the first heist he's attempting inside Torrens?" Lis asked as her eyes followed Haywood's progress. He passed through the gates—making the guards chuckle—and left her sight when he entered Mersey.

"I'm not an Apex expert, but based on the information I was able to gather on him this afternoon, I think so," Vorah said.

"He's changing his pattern." Lis shifted her gaze from the window, to her boots—which were discolored now and still squeaked. "But why?"

"Perhaps the Pea of Primeorder is too good for him to pass up," Vorah suggested.

Lis slightly shook her head. "I'm not certain that's the reason…but I suppose it doesn't matter. I do not care about his motivations; I only care that he is *caught*."

She steeled herself for one of Vorah's predictable remarks about being her teacher, but her friend said nothing.

Curious, Lis turned around.

Vorah was smirking in the direction of the open library door.

"What is it?" Lis asked.

Vorah glanced at her, and her smirk grew. "Just a curious onlooker." She slapped her hands on her thighs, making her chainmail jingle. "If you'll excuse me, Master. I believe you're on duty now? I'm going to relax a bit during my downtime."

Lis took a few steps so she could peer around a bookshelf and watch Vorah leave the library. Her friend brushed past Prince Channing, who stood in the hallway.

He slightly inclined his head when Vorah offered him a bow, but he immediately returned his attention to the library, his honey brown eyes glittering in the darker shadows of the hallway.

Lis offered her own bow to the prince when he met her gaze.

Prince Channing took a few steps forward but lingered in the doorway.

Lis blinked. *Is he waiting for a report of some sort? Or does he have more information for us?* "Can I be of assistance, Your Highness?" she asked when the prince showed no signs of moving on or speaking.

The prince took one purposeful step into the library, then stood ramrod straight with his arms tucked behind his back.

Yep, some military training for certain—but he is the heir, so that makes sense.

"I merely wished to inquire that your new quarters were to your liking," he said stiffly.

"They are," Lis said.

"Father said you turned down the original rooms prepared for you," he said as he ventured another step inwards.

"They were beautiful, but they would have been harder to fortify," Lis explained.

The original quarters Haywood has escorted them to were beautiful rooms filled with dainty furniture, picturesque windows, and magnificent fireplaces.

Their new—shared—room was smaller, less cluttered, and possessed no way to enter or exit besides the door. All of this put together made a room that was much easier to fight in, and much harder for Apex to sneak into.

"You were not offended by the choice of room?" Prince Channing asked as he stared at Lis' feet.

"Not at all. We appreciated your generosity—it was merely inappropriate for our task," Lis said.

The prince nodded at the floor. "I am glad to hear so."

Is he that fascinated with my boots? When we first met, he had no trouble at all staring at us, but now he seems afraid to meet my gaze.

Lis shifted her weight onto her heels and inwardly debated how she should make an excuse and leave the library—and the prince—when Channing abruptly spoke.

"I saw your match against Sir Louis of Loire." Channing edged a little farther into the room, pausing to inspect a lute carefully displayed on a shelf. "You were…a credit to your name."

My match against Sir Louis was in a tournament held in Loire…I thought King Albion said Channing had seen me defeat a goblin pack in Erlauf? "I believe I recall the match. It was during the summer tournament the Duke of Troyes holds every year." Lis brushed the hilt of her sword as she smiled at the memory.

"It's an impressive tournament," Channing said. "You only entered the swordsmanship contest, did you not?"

She straightened her spine and gave the prince her full attention once more. "That is correct."

Channing glanced at her before once again fixing his gaze upon the lute—as if it deserved a careful study. "Why did you not enter the jousting tournament? You are a very skilled combat rider—as you displayed when you fought off a goblin pack."

*I guess that means he **has** seen me more than once? The tournament makes sense—it's a social event, and nobility from*

across the continent attend. But when I fought the goblins it was for a contract I made with a smaller Erlauf city…

"My horse and I are not skilled in the traditional sense of jousting," Lis said. "My mare doesn't have the build for it, and I have practiced more heavily on actual combat than exhibition demonstrations."

Channing finally moved away from the lute and took another few steps closer to Lis. This time he stopped to minutely adjust the position of an armchair. "Why do you ride a mare instead of a gelding—or a stallion?"

"She had the particular temperament I was looking for in a horse." Lis cocked her head as she studied the prince, who still fussed with the chair. "But even before I chose her, I thought I might like a mare. I've seen too many idiots ride hot-headed stallions and then fail to control them in battle—particularly when they encounter mares."

Channing finally looked up, his chiseled brow ever so slightly furrowed in interest, and met her gaze. "It is a strategic decision, then?"

Lis nodded. "As a warrior for hire, I am more concerned with fulfilling my contracts and jobs, and less interested in putting my battle prowess on display. I much prefer my mare—whom I can count on to fight—than riding a war horse skilled at exhibition matches."

Channing nodded. "I see the logic in your decision. It is well thought-out."

"Thank you," Lis said sincerely.

She was used to people rolling their eyes at her mare—until they saw her in combat or facing a man, anyway. Prince Channing's admittance of respect made her feel a shred less suspicious of the strange situation.

Unexpectedly, Prince Channing gave Lis a full smile—one that flashed his teeth and made Lis gape. When Channing smiled, his features softened, his eyes brightened, and his stony face was positively handsome.

He… Lis didn't know what else to think besides admire the niceness of his smile.

The grin only lasted about two moments before Channing abruptly stiffened. "If you'll excuse me." He clicked his heels together and left before Lis could bow, marching from the room with a swift and rigid stride.

Lis watched him go somewhat bewilderedly. "He is a puzzle," she muttered.

I can't get a good read on him. I'm not sure if it's because he is purposefully masking his intensions, or if it's something more personal…

Lis shifted slightly and nodded when she felt the Pea of Primeorder roll in the pouch on her belt. *But it matters not. All I have to do is keep the Pea of Primeorder safe for three weeks. The prince can be as complicated as he likes. Once this contract is over, I'll likely never see him again.*

CHAPTER 4

The chair Lis and Vorah had carefully leaned against the door thumped quietly when it hit the wooden floor, and Lis awoke.

She strained her ears—though she kept her eyes closed.

The only thing she could hear was the inhale and exhale of Vorah's breath. Though it was deep and steady, it was also a sure sign Vorah was awake. (The warrior woman breathed as quietly as a mouse when she was really sleeping.)

Lis listened for anything: a board creaking, the door swinging open…there was only silence. Until…

There—she heard it.

The softest hush of cloth and the barest puff of his breath.

The so-called legendary thief had arrived.

Perhaps Apex is a better thief than I give him credit for. He obviously waited to learn more about us—we've been here in Mersey for four nights now…

Lis remained motionless, hopefully luring the thief deeper into the room, which would make it that much harder for him to escape when they closed in on him.

The quiet scuff near the foot of her bed meant he had reached the carpet Vorah had purposely repositioned to manufacture the change in sound.

But it was so soft, and Apex was so silent, Lis almost doubted her hearing—a very dangerous position for her to be in.

Vorah snorted in her "sleep," and smacked her lips—a long agreed upon cue to attack in tandem in fifteen seconds.

One…

Lis started the count, though it took every ounce of her will to remain relaxed while she felt a *presence* drift closer.

He must be leaning over me…but why did he pass over Vorah so swiftly? She had to carefully regulate herself so when she

reached the count of fifteen, she didn't tense or breathe in deeper, she simply flipped over and struck out with the heel of her foot, connecting solidly with a thigh.

Lis blinked, trying to clear her vision as the intruder—Apex—grunted in unexpected pain.

He was tall and clothed in tight, dark clothes made of soft fabric that barely whispered when he staggered backwards. A hood covered his hair, and a black cloth was wrapped around his jaw and nose, making it impossible to see his face.

No weapons—but his belt is worn where a sword scabbard should be strapped, and his left boot was definitely designed to hold a hidden dagger. So why doesn't he carry them?

The door smashed shut as Vorah flung herself from her bed and into the frame. She was barely visible in the dim flame of the oil lamp positioned on an end table at the far side of the room—away from the danger of being carelessly knocked over.

Lis flipped the covers off her bed in a single smooth movement and leaped to her feet.

Apex jabbed his fist at her torso, but Lis deflected the blow by smacking the inside of his elbow, forcing the strike wide. She followed up the deflection with a throat jab, but her main goal was to back the thief away from her bed and into a more open area where she could use her sword that was still strapped to her side.

Apex caught her fist in his palm, but Lis relentless pushed on, kneeing him in the stomach.

The painful move barely made him stagger, and Lis adjusted her stance to his fighting style.

She gritted her teeth when Apex recovered and rushed her before she had the chance to follow up and keep pushing him backwards.

She twisted to the side to avoid a powerful kick that would have nailed her in the shoulder, then blocked a jab to her chest.

Though her arms absorbed the blow, the contact stung, and it almost knocked her off balance with the strength of the strike.

Pound for pound, he has more muscle than me and is much stronger, but while he hits heavy and fast, he's by the book. He doesn't fight dirty—ironic, considering he's a thief. But that's easy to exploit.

Lis aimed a punch to his throat, which Apex raised his arm to block, but it was a feint. Instead, Lis slammed her knee into his unprotected side, then dragged her leg back and ground her heel into his gut. The combo made him back away from her bed, but then he merely moved to skirt around the other side of her bedframe.

What alarmed her most was not the swiftness with which he recovered, but that he never stopped edging towards her mattress.

Does he know the Pea is there?

"Vorah!" Lis shouted. She threw herself onto her bed and rolled across it, popping to her feet on top of the mattress, just in front of Apex.

She kicked at the thief's face, but he caught her foot and twisted it.

Lis dropped to the mattress rather than let the thief drag her straight off the bed, but Apex—still holding her foot—forced her leg high into the air.

Lis grinned at the crystalline jingle of Vorah's chained daggers.

Vorah flicked one of her chained daggers so it wrapped around the hand Apex held Lis' foot in, then pulled tight, wrenching his arm backwards.

Lis jumped to her feet as Apex stalked towards her friend. She launched herself into a jump kick—slamming Apex between his shoulder blades and smashing him into Vorah.

Vorah intercepted him, but instead of colliding with him, she ducked, slamming into his legs and knocking him over her shoulder.

Lis glided past her friend, moving to keep Apex wedged between them. She started to unsheathe her sword, but something about the situation stayed her hand. She felt uneasy

at the idea—and she hadn't gotten to be a top-ranking warrior by ignoring her gut.

Using my sword shouldn't be necessary. The thief is a better boxer than I, but no matter how skilled he is, he doesn't stand a chance with Vorah and I working together.

Apex grabbed the chain still wrapped around his wrist and pulled—trying to yank Vorah off her feet.

Vorah tossed her dagger to Lis—who now stood behind Apex. Lis caught it as she planted her foot on the thief's back, pulling his arm over his head. A swift tug, and the chain dropped free.

Lis threw the daggers back to Vorah and readjusted her stance as Apex burst to his feet.

He twisted, facing Lis as she hooked his legs and tried to drag them out from under him. He held solid but didn't see Vorah behind him.

She leaped into the air and kicked him in the lower back, making him grunt in pain.

Together, Lis and Vorah batted him back and forth like a child's ball, picking apart his defense and opening holes so the other could strike him.

Twice Apex tried to fight his way out from between them, but to no end.

Vorah and Lis had worked together through endless nights and shadowy days. Their movements were efficient, precise, and timed perfectly as if they were dancing together.

We're wearing him down. Just a bit longer, and we'll be able to restrain him.

Lis chopped the edge of her hand at Apex's throat.

He blocked the move, but this was only a distraction, meant to occupy him while Vorah yanked his arm up behind his back.

With the choice of either breaking his arm or going down to his knees, Apex dropped into a forward roll that dragged his arm from Vorah's grasp and carried him across the room.

"He's fleeing!" Lis snapped when she realized he had given up on pushing towards her bed. She sprinted across the room,

jumping onto the edge of Vorah's bedframe as the thief fumbled with the blocked door.

"Vorah, daggers!" Lis jumped from the bedframe to Apex's back. Her arms snaked around his chest as she swept her legs up and to the side, making Apex bend to the side as well.

He stilled for a moment, until the jingle of Vorah's chain daggers snapped him out of his inaction. He liquidly staggered back, and the dagger Vorah had thrown at him only sliced his side instead of sinking deep into muscle.

He swung around and rammed his back into the wall, squishing Lis between him and the unforgiving stone blocks.

Lis grunted in pain and fell in a heap. Though she couldn't breathe, she still had her wits about her and thrust her legs out as Apex ripped the door open, entangling his feet with hers.

He staggered and almost fell but recovered in the nick of time and ran down the hallway—almost perfectly silent.

"Lis, are you injured?" Vorah asked as she raced to the door.

"Summon the guards," Lis wheezed. "If they close up the castle now, we might still catch him."

Vorah nodded. She snatched up her daggers, then sprinted down the hallway, shouting. "Guards—alert! Apex is here!"

Lis shook her head as she recovered, pausing only long enough to snatch the Pea of Primeorder from under the mattress and place it carefully in the pouch on her belt.

When she scrambled into the hallway, Vorah was already out of sight.

Apex had left a few spatters of blood behind. Unfortunately, he must have bound the wound as he ran, for the droplets only led the way down the hallway before stopping entirely.

Lis mentally reviewed the most likely escape path he had taken—she and Vorah had spent their days going through the palace, memorizing all the hallways and routes—and ran down an intersecting hallway.

She had to hold onto the hilt of her sword to keep the scabbard from smacking her leg as she hurried through the castle.

Guards cycled through every few minutes, and Lis stopped long enough only to ask them if Apex had been caught.

We need to catch him, or he'll come back again—and this time better prepared!

Lis traced out the likeliest escape paths, searching for any sign of the thief—a drop of blood or a scrap of cloth—but there was nothing.

It was if he faded into the palace like a ghost!

Lis' breath came in steady puffs as she pivoted, readying herself to dash up a flight of stairs, when two short whistles made her pause.

Vorah trotted down the hallway, her lips pursed in irritation. "You couldn't pick up his trail either?" she asked.

Lis shook her head. "No. Is the castle closed up?"

"As tight as a merchant's purse," Vorah said. "I got word to the gatehouse; it should have closed in time."

Lis nodded and glanced around the hallway, her eyes lingering on the wood-paneled walls that glowed in the torchlight.

"You don't think he's still in Mersey, do you?" Vorah asked.

Lis nodded again. "Though he was sloppy in attacking us, his escape was flawless." She sighed. "It's going to be a real pain trying to catch him when he makes another attempt."

"You think he'll try again?" Vorah asked.

Lis snorted. "Given that we nearly had to knock his brains out to keep him from making for my mattress, yes."

Vorah stretched her arms above her head. "That's the truth. Come—we've been summoned by King Albion and Queen Theodora to meet them in the library." Vorah ambled back up the hallway, though she did raise an eyebrow. "And I do feel that I need to point out if you had used your sword and stabbed him through—as you very well could have instead of engaging in a fist fight—he would be pinned to the floor of our room right now."

"I don't like unnecessary bloodshed—and he was unarmed," Lis said as she joined her friend. "But mainly, there was

something *about* him."

Vorah laughed. "If anyone else besides you said that, I'd think Apex, the *legendary thief,* had gotten away with something tonight after all: your heart!"

Lis frowned as she tried to recreate Apex's image. "I was more thinking that there was something almost familiar about him."

The idea silenced Vorah's mirth. "Do you think maybe he didn't get away so much as he cast off his clothes and became unrecognizable?"

Lis was silent in thought, and the only noise in the hallway was the faint shout of guards clearing various hallways and floors, and the quiet tap of their synched footsteps. "It's a possibility."

Another minute of walking, and they reached the library.

Lis rapped on the door, then opened it. "You called for us, Your Majesties?"

Inside, King Albion paced in front of the lit fireplace, his expression anxious. Queen Theodora looked markedly less worried. She was seated in a chair besides one of the giant harps that stood in the library, her hand caressing it as if it were an old friend.

The queen smiled when she saw them. "Lis, Vorah, come in."

"Apex struck?" King Albion stopped pacing and instead rubbed his chest nervously.

Lis bowed. "Yes, Your Majesty. The guards have been notified, but I'm afraid he has escaped."

King Albion's expression was unreadable as he plopped down in an armchair. "Then he successfully stole the Pea of Primeorder."

"No, Your Majesty." Vorah said.

The king blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"The jewel is still under our protection." Lis grabbed the jewel out of the pouch and held it up for inspection.

The power locked inside it made Lis' fingertips tingle, and light from the fire cast extra sparks of light on its green surface

as she held it out to the king.

King Albion stared dumbly at the jewel. “You still have it?” he asked, sounding rather shocked.

Queen Theodora smiled. “As we could expect of two brave and skilled warriors such as Lisheva and Vorah!”

King Albion was still slack-jawed. “Apex didn’t take it?”

“No,” Lis said.

“You still have our apologies: we failed to capture him—though it was a near thing,” Vorah said.

Queen Theodora’s smile briefly blossomed into a *grin*, and King Albion sank lower in his chair.

“You almost caught him, you said?” The king’s voice was rather mild considering they were discussing a famous thief who had nearly succeeded in stealing a national treasure.

“Yes. We heard him enter our room and remained silent to draw him in…” Vorah launched into a description of the encounter as Lis returned the pea to the pouch on her belt.

*How **did** Apex know the gem was under my mattress? He must have known—there was no other reason for him to approach it. But only a select few knew of its location…*

The night they arrived, Lis and Vorah had explained the security measures they were taking, and had told King Albion, Queen Theodora, and Prince Channing where they intended to stow the Pea of Primeorder at night.

The chamberlain and Haywood were present then as well…but they appear to be among the most loyal of servants. Unless they ran their mouths later—an unlikely event considering the esteem placed in them—only those in the room would have known of the Pea’s location.

Lis glanced at Queen Theodora and King Albion as Vorah continued with her explanation.

Queen Theodora appeared amused—perhaps even delighted. King Albion stared blankly at Vorah as he listened.

Lis rested her hands on her sword belt and mentally reviewed the encounter with Apex. *There are too many abnormalities to this evening. Nothing has happened quite as*

logically as it should. The king appeared shocked *that we protected the Pea when our skill was the reason we were hired to begin with.*

The library door creaked open. “Father, Mother,” Prince Channing greeted them as he swept into the room, Haywood on his heels.

The prince was dressed in chainmail and a leather surcoat, though he was unarmed.

Behind him, Haywood looked mussed. His clothes appeared to be frantically thrown on, and, hidden from the king and queen’s sight by their son, he tugged his belt straight.

“Haywood tells me Apex struck.” Prince Channing swiveled so he faced Lis and Vorah, his expression as unreadable as ever. “Did he steal the Pea of Primeorder?”

“No,” Lis said.

The library was heavy with silence, until Vorah cleared her throat. “We were unable to capture Apex, but there is a chance he is still in the castle.”

Channing nodded once. “What measures have been taken?”

Vorah tapped the daggers strapped to her belt. “The guards have closed off all exits—including the gatehouse. But it’s possible that he has fled through unusual methods—for instance, escaping through a window and scaling the castle walls.” She glanced at Lis, who gave her a discreet signal—a brief look down before looking right. It was a request to keep talking.

Vorah nodded—though she covered it up by widening her stance folding her arms across her chest. “Additionally, he may simply be lying low, biding his time until we loosen security again.”

Lis turned her attention from the conversation to Haywood and Channing, who stood across from her.

The men were of similar size and build. Though Haywood appeared slightly winded—either from running through the castle or something else—he watched Prince Channing grip the back of an armchair.

Slowly, Lis felt the pieces of the puzzle fall into place. *Knowing where the jewel was kept, the strange reactions, his unlikely escape…it all makes sense.*

As Vorah continued to spout logical but unnecessary theories, Lis fixed her eyes on Haywood and slowly sidled up to him.

When he offered her a grin, Lis returned it, then started to turn back to the fire. She purposely knocked into a footstool that made her stumble, letting her pinwheel her arms.

In her show of falling, she jabbed Prince Channing in the side—the very place where Vorah had wounded Apex.

Channing grunted and his body stiffened.

CHAPTER 5

Lis dropped her pretend falling act and glared at the prince. "*You*," she snarled.

"Haywood!" King Albion said in a pleasant voice. "Please check in with the guards and hear their reports to see if any of them have caught sight of Apex."

"Yes, Your Majesty!" Haywood bowed and glanced curiously at Lis and Prince Channing before he slipped from the room.

Lis shoulders were tight with anger, and she barely noticed the servant's exit. "You're *Apex*—and you *knew*!" She swung around to accusingly face the King and Queen of Torrens.

This whole thing was a set up! A farce!

"You have the wrong idea, Lisheva," King Albion said soothingly.

Lis ignored him and pulled back from Channing to join Vorah. Together they slightly angled their bodies so they nearly stood back-to-back.

"Us against a royal family, huh? That's a new one." Though Vorah laughed, it was a harsh sound.

"We're not against you," Channing rumbled.

"Oh, really? You set this act up, then, for the fun of it?" Lis asked, the bite of her anger bleeding through her voice.

"Channing is the legendary thief, Apex," King Albion admitted.

"You don't say?" Lis asked.

"I love your humor when you get grouchy, Master," Vorah said as she discreetly tugged on her daggers, loosening them on her belt.

King Albion waved his hands in the air. "But this isn't what you think…probably."

"The sovereign prince—and heir apparent—to Torrens *isn't* a thief with loose and twisted morals who goes around taking

what isn't his, and you *didn't* invite us here on a pretext all so you could steal your own jewel?" Lis asked.

"Please, we owe you an explanation." King Albion turned to his son. "Channing?"

Channing held a hand to his wound and stared at the ground.

"Right. Well then." King Albion turned back around to face Lis and Vorah. "When we said the Pea of Primeorder is being targeted, it was the truth. The break-ins, the bandits, all of that was real. Given the Pea's power, we know we cannot let it fall into the wrong hands. We asked the Veneno Conclave for aid, but they said since the Pea of Primeorder is considered a national treasure, they couldn't get involved. So we had a very powerful weapon sitting in our castle, and as word continued to spread, it became obvious to us that the attacks and robberies were only going to get worse." He paused to take a breath and wrung his hands.

"We're listening," Lis said.

"The only way we could think of buying ourselves some time was to have the jewel *purposely* stolen from us. Channing really is Apex—which is frankly another tale to tell at a different time. We realized if he publicly stole it, the less-than-savory folk who were so keen on taking it would give up, and we could safely return it to the vault with no one the wiser," King Albion said.

"Stealing the Pea had to be believable," Channing said, speaking up. Finally. "We needed a warrior of renown to guard it, so when it *was* taken, no one would suspect an act."

"It was a win-win situation!" King Albion said brightly. "You would still receive your fee for the contract, the Pea would be safe once Apex stole it, and we wouldn't have to fear its capture anymore."

"Win-win?" Lis raised an eyebrow. "That's hardly true when Vorah and I would pay the price for your little stunt."

"Eh?" King Albion said.

"We must have bad luck, Master, to be the *lucky* recipients of this contract," Vorah said. "Or maybe we angered them at some

point?”

Channing cocked his head. “I beg your pardon?”

“*If* Vorah and I had been as unskilled as you obviously believe us to be, and Channing succeeded in stealing the gem, our reputation as warriors would have been tarnished,” Lis said.

“Not at all—we weren’t going to be upset with you. Obviously,” King Albion protested.

“Doesn’t matter,” Vorah piped in. “The rest of the Continent would see our ineptness—never knowing we weren’t in a *fair fight* from the beginning.” Vorah narrowed her eyes at Channing, and her voice was colored with a rare note of anger. “Serves you right that we beat you—even though you knew all our plans and defensive maneuvers.”

“We should have gone with less-skilled warriors,” King Albion admitted. When Lis and Vorah glared at him he tried to give them a grimacing smile. “What I mean to say is…we played this rather poorly and apologize.”

The king glanced over at his wife, who was still settled in her armchair. “Theodora, please help us explain to these lovely warriors.”

Queen Theodora smiled. “Why should I, when the two of you have so perfectly bungled this yourselves?”

Channing scuffed his foot on a rug and leaned more heavily on the armchair.

His wound must be bothering him. Good, Lis thought rather spitefully.

“Theodora, please?” King Albion asked.

The queen sighed. “Very well. What my husband and son are trying to say, dears, is that they are sorry. They didn’t realize the impact this mad plan would have on you or your reputations. Neither my husband nor Channing have any desire to hurt you—quite the opposite—which is why I was never in favor of this particular part of the plan to begin with.”

Lis and Vorah didn’t move from their fortified positions, but they did relax slightly. *It doesn’t seem like they mean us ill—*

though this was still a crooked, dishonorable ploy. I suppose I should have expected such a low-blow from royals. But I allowed myself to be swindled by their kind smiles and warm greeting.

Lis glanced at Channing, whose paling complexion was highlighted by the golden light of the fire. “He was stabbed,” she said, unwilling to bestow upon him the courtesy and decorum of his name and title. “He should have the wound dressed.”

Channing blinked and flicked his eyes in Lis’ direction.

She ignored him and stared at the King and Queen.

“Go ahead, son,” King Albion said before returning his attention to Lis and Vorah. “Warriors, I apologize. We…*I* see the error in my plan.” He sighed. “I suppose I merely felt backed into a corner without an ally to turn to.” He rubbed his face, then offered them a tired smile. “I do hope that despite the circumstances, you will at least spend the night.”

Lis scowled. “We will stay for the duration of our contract.”

King Albion brightened. “Really?”

“Sure,” Vorah said. “We *honor* our word. Or at least Lis does.” Her voice lacked guile of any sort, but the comment was as efficiently used as a dagger stabbed between the ribs.

“Though we trust we will *not* receive another visit from Apex and will instead concentrate on defending the Pea of Primeorder from the bandits and other forces that concern you so?” Lis asked, embracing the wryness in her voice.

“You have our promise,” King Albion assured her.

Lis mutely turned to Channing.

The prince bowed his head. “We will rely on you for the jewel’s protection and use this time to reformulate a plan.”

“We trust it will be so. If you will excuse us, Your Majesties. Your Highness.” Lis bowed to the monarchs before she swept from the library, the still-there simmering anger making her march a little louder than necessary.

Vorah closed the door behind them, then joined Lis in trotting down the hallway. “I can only imagine what new scheme they’ll come up with,” she muttered.

“Was it a mistake to stay?” Lis asked.

“Could you *really* break your word and live with it?” Vorah asked.

“If you thought they intended to attack us or do something equally as dangerous.”

Vorah snaked her arm through Lis’, joining them at the elbow. “In that case, rest easy. They were rather sheepish, and their regret was real. Prince Channing especially so.”

Lis frowned. “As Apex, he’s done worse things he should regret more.”

Vorah squeezed her elbow. “Give it time,” she said. “I’m still on duty when we get back to our room?”

“No.” Lis shook her head. “I’m awake for the day; I’ll stay up.”

“Awake for the day? It must be three in the morning!”

“Perhaps, but after that confrontation, I’m not sleeping anytime soon,” Lis said.

Vorah shrugged. “If you say so. Thanks for letting me rest, Master!”

“*Stop* calling me that.”

“Okay, Boss!”

A BUTTERFLY LANDED on a flower near Lis’ hand.

She watched it, a small smile budding as the breeze rustled a fragrant lilac bush. When the butterfly moved on, Lis laid down on the stone bench and closed her eyes.

Vorah had the Pea of Primeorder. It was her shift, so she had taken it with her when she went to the stable to check on their temperamental mares.

As it really was wisest for them to stay together as much as possible—particularly given their employer’s less-than-trustworthy actions—Lis reveled in the brief moment of quiet.

She faced the sky, enjoying the warmth of the sun. But all her joy drained from her when she heard footsteps.

She peeled her eyes open and shot upright, holding in a sigh when she saw Prince Channing standing at the entrance of the small flower garden.

"Lisheva," he said.

Lis stood only long enough to bow. "Your Highness."

Instead of walking away as she thought he would, Prince Channing ambled down one of the brick paths, drawing closer.

Lis watched him with a raised eyebrow.

He came to a stop just in front of her, nodded at his feet, then raised his eyes to meet her gaze. "I wanted to apologize."

Lis almost squinted up at him in her surprise but masked it by shifting on the bench. "Oh?"

"I did not think through the repercussions of our…plan," Prince Channing said. "I did not take into account how it would affect you, and I am very sorry for it. You are a warrior I respect."

This time she couldn't hold back her squint as she tried to peer past the earnest expression in his gold-brown eyes. "If you respect me, why did you ask Vorah and me to come here and be your scapegoats?"

Prince Channing rubbed the back of his neck for several long moments. Lis had almost given up on his reply when he abruptly answered. "Because I wanted to meet you. I've seen quite a bit of you in my…travels. You are," he paused, "courageous, strong, and yet kind."

The answer surprised Lis and made her pause. "Why do you steal?" the question fell from Lis' lips before she had a chance to clamp her mouth shut. *Oh, that was brilliant. Ask the Prince of Torrens in broad daylight why he is the legendary thief Apex. A fool-proof way to get an answer!*

Prince Channing nodded slowly. "May I sit?" he asked.

Why is he asking me? It's his bench! Lis moved to stand, but Prince Channing plopped down next to her before she could move and stretched his long legs out. (They were angled enough that Lis would have to hop awkwardly to get off the bench.)

“There are national treasures—legacies, really—of Torrens that have been lost and stolen over the years,” Prince Channing said. “It happens to every country. A royal sells off a piece of the crown jewels without telling anyone to settle debts; a thief breaks in and manages to steal a treasure of real worth…but some of Torrens’ most precious and meaningful artifacts were long thought lost, until I received word that some of them were being sold on the black market.”

Lis nodded slowly. “I have heard of such a thing. Baris is something of a hotbed of magical artifacts, tomes, and such—which is why we have such strict laws on our exports, to strangle the possibility of a black market developing.”

Prince Channing gripped the edge of the bench. “Torrens’ is not the only country whose artifacts have ended up there. Rumor has it one of the weapons of the Magic Knights of Sole and a dagger of some importance to Verglas once passed through as well. But while other countries have the means to reclaim their treasures, we do not.”

“You’re saying you can’t afford them?” Lis asked.

Prince Channing nodded. “Though our people prosper, as a country we are not rich or particularly affluent. Erlauf has its military might; all elven exports pass through Farset; Sole has old money among its nobility; Loire is the strongest country…in Torrens we have happy citizens.”

Lis would have scowled at the prince if not for the furrow of his brow. “Some would say happy citizens are the greatest treasure of all,” she said—perhaps a little tartly.

“They are,” Prince Channing agreed. “Which is why we cannot raise taxes. I cannot, in good faith, raise them beyond what my people can readily pay.”

“Ahhh, yes. Stealing is the far more honorable thing to do.” Lis nodded sagely.

“What else can we do?” Prince Channing asked.

She paused. “What do you mean?”

“If we cannot buy them outright, how else are we to reclaim the treasures of our country?” Though it sounded like a

challenge due to his deep voice, when he gazed at Lis, his expression was open.

Lis took a few moments to carefully consider her reply and formulate it without sounding offensive. “I am a warrior, not a scholar who is knowledgeable of such things…” she said cautiously. “But couldn’t you work to develop Torrens so it has its own specialty among the other nations?”

“But what could it be?” Prince Channing asked. “We haven’t the funds to create something like a university or to devote to schooling. We are among the most peaceful of nations and prosper with our harvests, but those goods are seasonal and perishable. They provide a good income for our citizens, but we can’t expand much beyond that.”

Thinking of all the beautiful instruments in the library, Lis thoughtfully peered up at the sky. “What about music?”

“Music?” Prince Channing asked, sounding confused.

“Music—and instruments.” She nodded at the palace. “You have more harps, violins, and instruments in your library than I have seen in the sum of my life.”

“Music is something Torrens has always had—it’s always been something our citizens have embraced. I don’t know if it is because most of our people are farmers, or simply tradition.”

“Can you not take it farther than simple enjoyment?” Lis asked. “Could you afford to hire those who create instruments, who write music and give them the freedom to truly pursue it?”

“Perhaps…” Prince Channing stood and paced back and forth. “We would do better to focus on instruments at the beginning. Our people already have the base knowledge. If we can improve on what we have and focus more on making each instrument a piece of art…and strive to reliably create the purest sound…. We could brand Torrens instruments as luxury pieces—much the way elven bows are viewed.”

He nodded to himself and stopped pacing, automatically taking up his military stance with his hands behind his back. “Once Torrens is known for their instruments, we can attract other musicians and innovate, and then teach *them*, so Torrens-

trained minstrels are more renown. *Then* we could finally tackle music itself—which would likely be the hardest to *truly* be known for given that each culture has its own preferences. But if we could convince Loire of our artistry, the other nations would fall in line under their example."

Lis only understood about half of what Channing was saying, but she could tell he was excited.

When he finally stopped his intellectual monologue, he turned to Lis. "Your counsel is wise, Lisheva."

Lis shrugged. "If you have grown up in such a musically inclined country, I imagine it is something like trying to see the forest through the trees. You aren't aware of the lower standard of instruments in other countries."

Prince Channing smiled—his handsome one that made his eyes glow.

"But this is a long-lasting plan," Lis said. "It will take time to build up the revenue so you can afford to buy back Torrens' treasures."

"And that is a bad thing?"

"Given how *thorough* you and King Albion appear to be in your thinking, I was unsure if everything you've stated actually appeals to you," Lis said dryly.

Prince Channing crouched in front of her, his smile mellowing as the breeze ruffled his hair. "Your words strike true, for we really have given you a poor picture of our honor. I apologize." He awkwardly cleared his throat. "Is there no way I can prove my integrity?"

Why does he care what I think of his honor? Lis licked her lips and replied on impulse. "Stop stealing."

Channing nodded slowly, then stood. "Very well. From today hence, I shall cease acting as Apex and will no longer pilfer our lost treasures."

Lis blinked up at him, unsure if she was more shocked that he had made the promise or that she actually *believed* him.

But the Torrens royal family is an odd sort. There are very few nobles who would be as upset as he is that I had such a low

opinion of him. And there are even fewer members of nobility—in any country—who would earnestly ask a warrior for advice.

"I am glad to hear you say so," Lis said perhaps a little awkwardly. (It was hard not to be awkward when Channing watched her with his intense, glittering eyes.) She hesitated. "Will your parents be upset?"

Channing shrugged. "Mother always hated it, and while Father supported my actions, they did give him anxiety."

Lis snorted. "I imagine so. His only heir running around as a thief—it's a wonder he didn't rip all his hair out and turn bald." She thought she had muttered it at a quiet enough volume, but nearly jumped from her seat on the bench when Prince Channing chuckled.

It sounded almost like the chuff of a tiger—deep, guttural, and short, but pleasant at the same time.

Lis smiled hesitatingly at the sound and vaguely wondered if it was acceptable to laugh with a prince.

"Thank you for your time, Lis." Channing swapped his smile for a blank face rather quickly, but Lis could still see the warmth in his unusually colored eyes. "I hope to see you again soon."

He was off, striding from the gardens, before Lis could bow.

Lis watched him, her eyes lingering on the side he still favored—for it had only been three days since Vorah had partially stabbed him.

Perhaps the royal family is kinder than I thought? Though I am not so simple as to be entirely converted after one conversation. But Prince Channing is unexpectedly…thoughtful.

She shrugged and once again splayed out over the bench, intent on enjoying her few remaining minutes off duty as she listened to the breeze play in the garden.

CHAPTER 6

Lis briefly rested her fingers on her belt pouch that contained the Pea of Primeorder. Reassured by its weight, she returned her attention to Vorah, who strolled at her side.

"We have ten days left on our contract." Vorah tugged on the neckline of her leather doublet. (Both she and Lis had opted for maneuverability for the day and had thus swapped their chainmail for their light—but far more pliable—leathers.) "What will we do next?"

Lis tied her hair back with a leather cord, containing her curly hair behind her. "They might offer to renew our contract."

"Would you agree to it?" Vorah asked.

"I don't know." Lis blinked as they left the shade of the castle and stepped into the courtyard. "I was hoping you might have something to say about the matter." She squinted in the bright light, waiting impatiently for her eyes to adjust.

"They've kept their word," Vorah said. "Since *that* night they've worked tirelessly on improving their castle security."

"It proves they are willing, yes, but they still haven't found the source of their information leak," Lis muttered as they passed by a huddle of guards.

A second glance revealed the guards were congregated around Queen Theodora and Prince Channing.

Queen Theodora smiled and chatted with Haywood and the chamberlain while Prince Channing and one of the guards seemed to be considering the city gates.

"Maybe so," Vorah agreed, jerking Lis from her observations. "But our main concern in working for them was their integrity. I think we can trust them enough to stay on for three more weeks if they…" she trailed off.

“What is it?” Lis asked.

Vorah nonchalantly unhooked her daggers from her belt. “Tell me, does anyone by the city gates look familiar?”

Lis swept her eyes across the courtyard—careful not to linger too long on any one spot. It took her a second pass before she saw him: a man wearing scruffy clothes standing in the shadows on the other side of the gates. “…Is that?”

“One of the little friends of that merry chap we left out in the forest for ant-food? Yep!” Vorah winked dramatically. “I never forget a face! Particularly one as unpleasant as his.”

“Perhaps he’s here to meet the informant,” Lis murmured, careful to keep her voice low.

“Perhaps,” Vorah agreed. “Shouldn’t we ought to go have a little *chat* with him?”

“It would be the polite thing to do,” Lis said.

They meandered toward the gates, purposefully *not* looking at their target as they drew closer.

The ruffian didn’t notice them—he seemed to be watching Prince Channing and Queen Theodora.

Almost there. Lis kept her expression bland as she and Vorah reached the shadow of the gate. It was hard not to be gleeful given that the thief still hadn’t seen them.

Vorah flexed her fingers and looked up at the gatehouse, and Lis adjusted her ponytail.

“Lis, Vorah,” Prince Channing called to them. “Good day to you.”

Lis had to bite back a curse as the bandit yanked his gaze to them. He turned pale when he saw them, turned around and started sprinting through the street.

“Stop that man!” Vorah bellowed as she gave chase, plowing through the gateway.

“Vorah, cart!” Instead of following the man, she deviated to the side where a horse cart adorned with the Torrens royal crest of a brown bear was picketed.

The cart was more of a chariot, really, with a raised bench seat for a driver and a passenger, and a small stand and railing

bolted to the back where a groom could stand.

Lis untied the pair of bay colored horses hooked to the cart. The animals neighed and tossed their heads as she vaulted into the driver's spot on the bench.

The guards started to protest, until Prince Channing joined her. "Whom are we chasing?" He also leaped into the front seat, leaving Vorah to scramble onto the groom's stand with a scowl.

"A bandit that attacked us when we were enroute to Mersey. Hold on." Lis snapped the reins, and the horses leaped into a fast, ground-eating gait.

"This is a message-running pair," Channing shouted over the clop of their hooves on the road. "They run hot-tempered and fast."

"What good luck—that's just what we want," Lis said as they careened down the street.

"I see him!" Vorah shouted. She clung to the railing fastened to the back lip of the cart with one hand and pointed with the other.

The bandit was still running and had gotten two blocks ahead of them, though with the horses, they were closing in on him fast. He started to turn a corner and risked glancing over his shoulder. He kicked his running up a notch when he caught sight of them bearing down on him. But as he wasn't looking where he was going, he smashed into a cart that held chickens in cages, raising up a cloud of feathers and an upset cluck or two before he righted himself.

Shedding feathers in his wake, the bandit darted up an alleyway.

"That road is too tight to take this cart down," Channing said.

"Understood." Lis drove the horses past the alleyway and turned at the next street, which was much wider.

The horses' tack and the cart jangled as they zoomed down the street—the noise was enough of a warning that people ran to clear their path before they reached them.

They ran parallel to the alleyway, popping out at an intersection.

“There he is again,” Vorah struggled to point to him, her hand bobbing with the jostling cart as she tried to point out the staggering bandit.

“I see him.” Lis adjusted the way the diving reins were threaded through her fingers. “Messenger horses respond to gee and haw for turning right and left, yes?” she asked Channing as she studied the busy street the bandit was weaving his way up. Everything from oxen-pulled carts to lose livestock cluttered up the road.

“Yes.” Channing gripped the arm rest of the bench seat. “Aren’t you going to slow down?”

Lis shot him an amused look, then shouted. “Gee!” to the horses as she twitched her fingers to pull on the right reins.

The horses snorted as they turned, the muscles in their necks and shoulders bulging as they merged onto the busy street.

“Slow down?” Vorah complained from the groom stand. “Why? At the rate she’s driving, we’ll be lucky if we catch him.”

Channing twisted around to stare at Vorah while Lis deftly wove the horses in and out of traffic.

“He’s on foot,” Lis said conversationally as she narrowly missed colliding with a donkey pulling a cart filled with lumber. “It shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Oh—he saw us. He’s turning down another back lane!” Vorah said.

“Will we fit, Your Highness?” Lis asked. “Haw!”

The horses jerked left, avoiding a tipped-over wheelbarrow.

“Down that road? Yes.” Channing grimly held on. “Though crossing traffic to turn left will be difficult here.”

“Perhaps,” Lis said absently.

She didn’t slow, and the horses didn’t miss a stride as they charged towards the alley. Lis’ eyes flicked over the street traffic, and she snapped the reins. “Haw, haw, haw!”

The horses sped up as they threw themselves into the turn, cutting through a narrow break between a herd of sheep and a carriage.

They entered the alleyway with a clatter, the horses tossing their heads as the side of the cart scraped a stack of crates. At the far end of the smelly passageway was the bandit. He uttered a little yelp when he saw they had followed him.

“Lis,” Vorah complained. “You’re being poky. He might actually get away. I can barely see him at the end of the alleyway!”

“Fine, do you want to drive?” Lis asked.

“Yes!” Vorah said enthusiastically.

“*What*?” Channing shouted—perhaps the loudest and for certain the most incredulous sound Lis had ever heard him speak.

“Ready?” Lis asked.

“I’m your eager student, Master!” Vorah sang.

Lis rolled her eyes as she slid off the bench, precariously crouching instead.

With a grunt, Vorah kicked off the back of the cart and hefted herself over the side, landing on the bench in an ungraceful heap.

“Are you *truly* switching drivers without stopping?” Channing scowled.

“It’s faster this way. On your left.” Vorah snaked her left arm around Lis’ left shoulder and entwined her fingers in the rein.

Lis let go with her left hand and shifted to the right. “Excuse me, Your Highness,” she said as the horses continued to stride down the alleyway—which was quickly coming to an end.

“Right!” Vorah called.

Lis shifted so her right hand crossed her body. She was practically sitting on Channing’s lap as she passed the rein over.

“Take ‘em. I have to get in back to counter our weight,” Lis said.

“Got them!” Vorah snatched up the rein and leaned left. “Go.”

Vorah grabbed the back of the cart and flipped herself over it. She landed on the little platform designated for the groom and smacked into the back of the cart. She had just enough time

to fix her stance and swiveled her sword so instead of hanging down at her side, the scabbard fell into a latch Lis had commissioned for times like this so it hung horizontally across her lower back.

“Haw, haw, haw!” Vorah shouted as she snapped the reins.

The horses lurched into a canter as Vorah pulled them into a tight left turn when the alleyway opened up into a road.

Lis held on to the railing but leaned back and to the side—taking her precariously far away from the cart. Her weight countered the horse’s momentum as they rammed through the turn, keeping the cart on the ground.

They joined a street that was—thankfully and unfortunately—a main road. The path was nice and broad, and there were fewer people walking by foot, but the road was still cluttered with other carts, horses, and animals.

Lis popped upright. “He’s about two blocks down.”

Vorah tisked. “Considering he was such a poor fighter, he is an unfortunately good runner. Haw!”

Under Vorah’s guidance, the horses bolted out from behind a slow-moving carriage, veering onto the other side of the road. They nearly crashed with an oncoming hay cart until Vorah snapped the reins. “Gee!” she shouted, and the agile horses lurched back onto their side of the road.

Lis threw herself around to counterweight the abrupt movements, then returned to clinging to the back of the cart.

She peered over the cart just in time to see a washerwoman carrying a bundle of clothes step into the street.

“Watch out!” Channing shouted.

Lis ducked down behind the cart, though that did not block out the colorful and impressive swearing oaths the washerwoman shouted at Vorah.

“Sorry!” Vorah shouted as they thundered past.

When Lis stood upright again, Vorah was laughing and peeling a green waistcoat and a lime green jacket off her person.

Channing wore his usual stony expression *and* a petal pink woman's gown that slapped against his body.

"That is a very fetching color for you, Your Highness," Lis managed to say without laughing.

"Is it really *necessary* to chase after this bandit at such a fast pace?" Channing growled as he shoved the dress off.

"'Fraid so. If Lis wasn't such a slow driver we could have caught him by now," Vorah said, ducking to avoid getting a flag in the face when they passed under the overhang of a home.

Lis snorted. "I'm not a slow driver—you just have less care for your own neck."

"Or I'm the better driver," Vorah said smugly.

"Was *that* why you crashed our cart when we were chasing that counterfeiter in Arcainia?"

"That was one time! And the only one who got hurt was the counterfeiter." Vorah tisked again. "And now we're stuck behind a slow cart. Hold on! Haw, haw, *haw*!" Vorah directed the horses so they blazed a trail down the center of the road, squeezing between the two lanes.

"Both of you are mad," Channing muttered.

Lis laughed. "I think it's ironic, Your Highness, that given what *you* have chosen to do with your free time, a little chase scares you so."

"Hear, hear," Vorah snorted.

"This road is about to intersect with a market," Channing said.

Lis craned her neck to see better. "I see it—he's running in amongst the stalls."

"Wonderful, we'll catch him in the market, then," Vorah said brightly.

"*What*?" Channing thundered.

Instead of turning with the road, Vorah urged the horses into the market—a less than ideal driving area due to the narrow walkways and random pattern of stalls.

A woman screamed at them and threw a basket of apples into the air when they charged past her stand.

“Apologies!” Lis shouted back to her over her shoulder. “Vorah—get him now. We’re scaring everyone.”

“Yes, Master!” Vorah risked giving her a mock salute before she adjusted her grip on the reins.

Channing shook his head but reported, “He’s run to the left, where the cloth and clothing merchants are.”

As he spoke, the bandit did indeed turn left, disappearing into another row of stalls.

“That’s fine. We can snake around and get him. *Haw!*”

The horses turned sharply, their manes and tails whipping in the wind. At the back of the cart, Lis had to swing so sharply to keep the cart grounded she nearly flung herself off.

The pounding of the horses’ hooves on the cobblestone was deafening as the team bolted into the next aisle.

Vorah leaned forward in the seat, shouting guidance to the horses as they made another right turn to avoid a man carrying jugs of water. The turn was so sharp the horses were parallel with the man before the cart hurtled over to the side as well.

Lis swung around the back, automatically moving to aid Vorah’s driving.

As crazy as the female warrior was, Lis *did* trust her driving skills with her life. She was possibly the best horseman she had met, and it was a thing of beauty to see her with the animals.

Once again, Lis caught sight of the bandit. He was still one aisle over, and he didn’t notice as they raced past him.

“Too far, Vorah!” Lis yelled.

“Got it, I’ll cut him off. Jump out!” Vorah ordered.

“*Jump*?” Channing’s voice was back to a shout. “And break every limb in our bodies?”

“Well, I’ll be,” Vorah said. “You actually *do* have a sense of humor hidden somewhere behind your rock-face. Isn’t that good news, Lis?”

“Jumping—take care on your corners.” Lis briskly hopped off the back of the cart. She stumbled from the momentum and had to throw herself into a forward roll to keep from face-

planting. It made her sword uncomfortably prod her back, but it was better than getting a face full of stone.

Channing landed lightly in front of her—also rolling, although with a great deal more grace.

Probably from his days of thievery. But still, maybe I can ask him how he learned to move like that.

"Let's go!" Lis sprung to her feet and ran to intercept the bandit.

As she jumped a pile of straw, she loosened the latch on her sword so it stopped twisting her belt and again hung from her hip. Still running, she unhooked her sword from her scabbard as she and Channing skid into the next lane.

The bandit raced past them, though he braced his feet and stopped running when Vorah and the horses rammed into the far end of the lane, heading him off.

He swiveled—intending to flee deeper into the market—but Channing managed to grab him by the shirt and yank him backwards.

Channing flung the bandit at Lis. The bandit snarled as he tried to punch at her throat. Lis blocked with her left forearm, then—using her knuckles—swung her right fist and nailed him in the inner arm, close to the elbow joint.

The bandit yelped in pain and staggered backwards.

Lis followed up with chopping the side of her hand into his throat—making him choke. She finished by kneeing him in the gut and pushing on his shoulders, sending him sliding back into Channing.

Channing easily kicked out one of the bandit's legs from underneath him as he grabbed his wrists and forced them behind his back.

Off balance and on one leg, the bandit staggered and fell—with Channing guiding him down. Once there, the prince pinned the bandit to the ground with a knee to his back and held the ruffian's wrists secure.

"Tidy work," Lis said.

"We should call the nearest guards," Channing said.

“Don’t worry. They’ll come soon!” Vorah cheerfully called. She and the horses—which she had slowed to a walk, though they still tossed their heads and flicked their black tails—clattered up the lane with more cheer than the situation warranted. “With all the fun we’ve had, I don’t think they could have missed us.”

Lis grinned—possibly from Vorah’s observation, the adrenaline, *and* from having caught the bandit. “You’ll want to question him,” Lis said.

The bandit cursed and wriggled on the ground until Channing forced his arms higher. “Why?” Channing asked.

“He might have information on whoever is leaking stories from the palace,” Lis said.

Channing furrowed his brow as he looked up at her. “You know about that?”

Lis shrugged and rested her hands on her belt. “How else would a gang of bandits know about Vorah’s and my impending arrival?”

“I wouldn’t hold my breath that he knows anything at all useful.” Vorah halted the horses and leaped lightly from the cart. She walked around front to the horses and patted their sweaty necks. “Ant-boy couldn’t even tell us his leader’s name.”

“Ant-boy?” Channing asked.

“We can explain when the guards have him in custody,” Lis nodded at the bandit, but paused when she heard a piercing whistle. “And I believe those are your guards.”

Men wearing chainmail with surcoats in Torrens’ colors swarmed the market. When they saw Channing, they bowed—but they eyed Lis and Vorah with suspicion.

“Your orders, Your Highness?” The lead guard asked.

Channing stood, dragging the bandit up with him. “Take this man in for questioning.”

The guards immediately spread into an organized formation. “Yes, Your Highness!”

“I done nothing!” the bandit protested as they hauled him away.

Prince Channing dusted off his trousers as he watched them leave. “That was…an experience.”

“Why thank you, Your Highness.” Vorah beamed as she draped an arm over one of the horses’ backs.

“It wasn’t a compliment,” Channing grunted.

“We must thank you for your help, Your Highness, in capturing him. I hope he is able to provide new information,” Lis said.

“Channing,” the prince said.

Lis paused. “I beg your pardon?”

He offered her a brief smile. “Please, call me Channing.”

CHAPTER 7

The following day, Lis knocked on the door of the library.

"Come in," Channing called.

Lis slipped inside and was surprised to find Channing sitting rail straight in a chair, cradling a lute in his hands. "Your Highness," she said.

Channing strummed the lute and looked up at Lis, his face expressionless.

Who sulks with a stoic face? This prince, apparently. "Channing," she amended.

He nodded in satisfaction. "Lis," he said. "Did you need something?"

Lis watched him dexterously strum the lute, drawing a beautiful sound from it. "I was wondering what information the bandit revealed after his questioning."

"Ah." Channing stood and returned the lute to its place of honor on a shelf. "Not much, I'm afraid. He did not have the informant's name—he hasn't even seen him or her, so he could not identify them either. He said his party received their information and orders in paper or from other groups in the ring."

Lis frowned. "That's no help, then. There might be twenty informants within the palace, and he wouldn't know. Whoever is leaking information is unfortunately clever."

"He did tell us the location from which he fetches the orders," Channing said.

Lis rested her hands on her belt. "Will that help you at all? With the fuss we raised catching him, I assume whomever the leak is has heard of it."

"Most likely," Channing said. "But we're trying to infer as much about the informant as possible given the location and

method of the message-delivering—though that still offers very little illumination. The spot is basically a hole in a wall." He paused. "Would you like to see it? You—or Vorah—might notice something we missed."

"Vorah is napping at the moment, but if you think I can be of service, I would be interested in seeing it," Lis said.

"Of course." Channing held the door open for her and beckoned her to leave first.

Together they walked down the paneled castle hallway, Channing gesturing whenever they needed to turn into a different passage.

"Your teamwork with Vorah is commendable," he said rather suddenly as he led her down a spiraling staircase.

"Are you referring to our combined efforts with the horses and cart, or to the night we fended you off?" Lis asked with a slight smile.

"Both," Channing said seriously. "The way you strengthen one another and work so fluidly together—I've never seen anything like it. Is it because Vorah is your student?"

Lis made a negative noise in the back of her nose. "She's not really. She just says that to irritate me. It's true I'm better than her in combat, but she is a far superior horsewoman and tracker. We work well together because we've been companions for over two years now."

Lis followed after Channing when the staircase ended. He led her down a small hallway and popped out of a guard entrance and into a courtyard. "When you sweat and bleed with someone, it bonds you," she continued. "I value Vorah's skills and what we can accomplish together, yes, but she has also become a very dear friend. I am blessed to have her."

"Is it easier to work with her?" Channing asked as they crossed the courtyard, rounding the side of the palace and heading for the gates. "I have not heard of many female warriors."

"There aren't many," Lis agreed. "In Baris—where I come from—it is more common for a female to be trained in basic

self-defense, but that is not so in other countries—Farset being the exception, of course. Vorah won't say what country she is from, but I think it was hard for her before we started traveling together. Combined, we are a much harder target to take down, and as little as I like to admit it…it makes folk look at us as exotic and noble exceptions."

"But the two of you are carving a trail. Perhaps in the future, there will be more female warriors," Channing said.

"I'd like to think so," Lis said. She was trying to picture a future where it was so, and it almost made her miss Channing's question.

"Do you think together we might be able to learn how to move as synchronized as you and Vorah are?" he asked.

When she glanced at him, he resolutely stared at the gates that loomed before them as they drew closer.

Lis nodded calmly for several moments as she mentally replayed his words. *That can't be what he's really asking. Why would he ever ponder such a thing?* "Again, I must ask if you are referring to our ability to jointly survive Vorah's driving skills or our fighting techniques."

"Fighting," Channing said.

Lis was grateful they arrived at the gates, for several of the guards bowed to Channing, giving her time to think.

I don't think I've ever met someone so baffling before. Why would he be concerned about us fighting together?

After they passed through the gatehouse, Channing looked expectantly at her.

"I believe anyone can fight as Vorah and I do, Your High—Channing," Lis said. "It only takes time and dedication. And trust," she added.

Channing thoughtfully nodded. "I see. This way."

They followed the wall that separated the castle palace and keep from the city proper.

"Here." Channing stopped and pried a piece of mortar from the wall, opening a small hole that was approximately as wide as Lis' thumb.

“They must have been short messages,” Lis said. “For I don’t think one could fit much paper in there.” She crouched next to the wall and peered at the hole.

“Whoever decided on this spot is daring—or knows the guard schedule.” Channing backed up slightly so he could look up at the top of the wall. “Guards patrol the wall-walk frequently.”

Lis narrowed her eyes and poked a finger into the hole. “I’m afraid I can’t offer any observations—except to say it seems you are dealing with someone especially cunning.”

Channing scuffed his foot on the gritty, dirt path. “Understandable. It is just a hole in the wall.”

Lis thoughtfully tapped the wall. “Though based on Vorah’s and my conversation with the bandit we captured before arriving, I wonder if the messages are not only from an informant, but from the leader of that particular bandit ring?” She narrowed her eyes in thought. “For our bandit had never met his leader—and you said it was the same for the one you captured as well?”

Channing—aware of the “ant-boy” situation after she and Vorah had explained it to him and the king and queen the night before over dinner—glanced back up the walls. “That is a possibility that had not occurred to me.” He paused. “It takes a certain level of cunning to not only successfully broker information, but to also run an illegal activity from *within* the palace itself.”

“Perhaps I’m wrong—no, it’s likely I am wrong,” Lis said. “But it seems odd how neither bandit has met their leader nor the informant.”

“Lis!”

Lis remained crouching but twisted so she could watch Vorah trot down the path—gingerly stepping over the remnants of a shattered jug. “Is something the matter?” she asked when Vorah was close enough to hear without shouting.

“Maybe,” Vorah said. “The maids already cleaned our rooms when you returned to our quarters to get materials to polish

your sword this morning, hadn't they?"

"Yes," Lis said.

Vorah grimly flattened her lips. "Then I'm afraid someone was poking around our room."

"No one has permission to enter your quarters except for the maid servant assigned to you—and she directly serves my mother," Channing said.

"Well, someone was in there." Vorah scratched her chin and narrowed her eyes, making her freckles stand out. "There were no signs of forced entry, but I recognized a few of our belongings were shifted ever so slightly."

Channing flattened his lips. "There should be guards patrolling the hallway outside your room. I will speak to them and see if they have observed anything unusual."

"Thank you," Lis said as she hefted herself upright. "Though I am starting to think perhaps you're dealing with a mage—or someone who is as skilled at moving through a castle without raising suspicion as you are."

When she stood, he offered her his hand.

Lis glanced at Vorah, who smirked, then reluctantly held out her hand.

Channing took it, and Lis couldn't quite figure out if he squeezed it or pumped it in a brisk handshake as he released it quickly.

"I will see you both this evening at supper," Channing said before he turned on his heels and strode back the way they came.

"What was that?" Lis asked bewilderedly as she watched him go.

"If I'm interpreting His Highness correctly, that was his version of a passionate embrace," Vorah said.

Lis scowled at her friend.

"He didn't offer *me* a handshake—or whatever you want to call that."

Lis sighed. "A prince like Channing would never entertain such ideas."

“Ideas of marriage?” Vorah asked. “Maybe. He’s about as emotional as a potato, but he’ll have to produce an heir somehow.”

Though Lis fought off a smile, she lost, making Vorah’s grin grow.

“I meant he wouldn’t fantasize over marrying a commoner. Royals marry royalty,” Lis reminded her friend.

“His father was the one who rambled on about princesses not having to be of noble birth,” Vorah pointed out.

Lis pinched the bridge of her nose. “This country is strange.”

“No, it’s royal family is absolutely *mad*. The country itself seems pleasant enough—if not overly *friendly*.” The way Vorah spoke, it sounded like the idea horrified her. “No one has even looked at our trousers and weapons with a condescending eye. It’s not natural.” She shook her head in false piety.

“We won’t remain here much longer.” Lis picked her way back up the path, leading the way back to the gates. “Though I do hope they extend our contract a *little* while.”

“Oh, I see! So, the love is mutual?” Vorah asked.

Lis shot a glare over her shoulder.

“I’m just hopeful,” Vorah said. “Don’t you know what kind of armor you could buy for *both* of us if you were a princess?”

“Ignoring the impossibility of actually marrying Channing, can you truly see me as a mincing, dress-wearing, mild-mannered princess?” Lis asked.

“Who said you would have to *be* a mincing, dress-wearing, mild-mannered princess?” Vorah asked.

“Never mind—you’re being ridiculous,” Lis grumbled. “No. I am hoping they’ll extend our contract because now *I* wish to see that the ignoble rogue who serves as the mole is brought to justice.”

“May it be so!” Vorah declared as they passed through the city gates—receiving salutes from the guards as they passed with smiles and waves.

Lis glanced back at the castle wall. *Perhaps, if the informant is so skilled at finding information, Vorah and I ought to change*

how we carry the Pea of Primeorder and find a better nighttime hiding place for it…

Vorah, oblivious to Lis' thoughts, continued, "Come to think of it, I do, too. Especially since the rat went through my things. She—or he—better not have gotten their grubby fingers on my saddle. I lugged it all the way up to our room to clean this morning and it took me ages to get the fingerprints off it," Vorah complained.

Lis listened carefully to Vorah's ramblings. Not because she particularly sympathized with her complaints, but because it was much better for her to dwell upon that than whatever Channing's strange actions meant.

I'm a warrior, she reminded herself. *Not a princess. And that is the end of this tale.*

NIGHT HAD ALMOST FALLEN, but Lis felt no desire to return to the palace. Instead, she leaned against her horse, surrounding herself with the familiar scents of horse and leather tack. The stables were quiet—except for the occasional snort from a horse and the munching of hay. Vorah had originally come out with her to see to the horses, but she left when the last stable hand had. And yet, Lis couldn't find it in herself to leave.

Her mare lipped Lis' hip but didn't move away from her when Lis draped her arms across the horse's neck.

Four more days. She reminded herself. *Only four more days of Mersey and the strange royal family.* She didn't know if the thought relieved her or made her heart ache.

No progress had been made in catching the informant, and Channing persisted in his…strange behavior.

I cannot understand him. He acts perfectly normal for most of the day, but then there are times where I turn around and find him watching me, or he'll say things…

Lis stubbornly shook her head and went back to brushing her horse.

The stable door creaked. Lis paused mid-brush stroke long enough to confirm her mare—trained for battle with a personality twice as mean—pricked her ears, but did not appear at all upset even as someone walked down the aisle.

Lis patted her horse on the shoulder and went back to brushing the animal's already gleaming coat.

The footsteps stopped just outside the stall. "The stables are borrowing a chambermaid from the palace to care for this beauty of yours," Channing said.

Lis nearly choked on her own heart in surprise. *Why? Whyyy does he persist in following me around and mucking up my thoughts? It's embarrassing! I'm a warrior; I should be above this!*

"A wise decision." Lis stepped back from her mare and offered Channing the most unemotional, brisk smile she could muster. "Both Vorah's mare and my own are quite…particular."

Channing nodded and took a step closer to the stall door. "I have heard of their disdain for the male gender. They did a number on one of the grooms."

"My apologies. They are man-haters," Lis confirmed. "We bought them for that reason. Their hatred of males makes them harder to steal and excellent fighters even though they aren't true war horses."

"I see." Channing tilted his head as he edged even closer to the stall; he was only an arm's length away from the door.

Lis' mare pinned her ears, then ignored the prince and viciously ripped hay from her hay rack.

Lis wasn't sure if this relieved her—the last thing she needed was her horse attacking the prince—or worried her, for usually her horse would bare her teeth and snort at a man as close to her as Channing was.

"What brings you out to the stables this evening, Channing?" Lis asked.

"You," Channing said bluntly.

Lis went back to leaning against her horse in the vain hope that some of the mare's hatred of men would maybe rub off on her and keep her from blushing like an idiot. *Enough. He's likely here to discuss our contract.*

"How can I be of assistance?" she asked.

"I would like to discuss the end of your contract."

See? Grimly satisfied, Lis nodded. "Of course." She dropped the brush in a wooden bucket and rubbed her hands together to rid them of dirt. "Which of the conditions would you like to discuss?"

"Would you like to stay in Torrens?"

Lis had to replay his question in her mind twice to confirm she was not losing her sanity or her hearing. "Do you mean you're asking if Vorah and I would like to lengthen our contract?"

"Vorah could stay as well," Channing said.

This man. He missed his calling as a spy—he has the required sneaky skills and the ability to speak in an unfathomable code! Lis moved to stand at the stall door so she could watch Channing's expression and hopefully get a better read on him. "I'm afraid I really don't understand what you are trying to say."

The corners of Channing's mouth turned down. "I'm asking if you would like to live permanently in Torrens."

Lis set her hand on the edge of the stall door. "I'm a mercenary warrior, Channing. I don't have a permanent residence—I go wherever my contracts require me to."

"And if you had a reason to stay?" Channing stepped even closer to the stall, though his eyes were fixated on her.

Lis hesitated. "I—I…"

Channing set his warm hand on top of hers, and every thought in her mind stilled.

The stable seemed unnaturally quiet, and Lis stared at their hands, unable to speak, unable to *think*.

Channing seemed content to merely stand there. His slight frown was gone, replaced by a subtle upturned smile.

Lis sucked in a breath of air and forcibly gathered her mushy mind together. “You need to speak frankly. Your words are open to many interpretations that could cause misunderstandings. What sort of reason would I have to stay?”

Channing subtly cocked his head and leaned against the stall door—though he did not remove his hand. “I thought it was obvious. I—”

Lis mare struck, snorting and pinning her ears as she forcefully rammed between Lis and the stall door.

She did not carry on and rear at Channing as she normally would have, but she did press her face against the bars of the stall and paw at the door.

Lis lightly smacked her horse on the shoulder, and her mare turned her attention to Lis, twining about her almost like a cat—though she still snorted a challenge to Channing as she glared at him over Lis’ shoulder.

She was not yet calm when the stable door clattered open.

“Channing! There you are, my boy—and Lisheva! What fun!” King Albion chortled as he ambled down the aisle. “So, have you—ahh…hahah!” King Albion broke off whatever he was going to say when Channing shook his head at him, and the king instead stroked his beard. “What a fine night it is!” he finally declared.

“It is, Your Majesty,” Lis said when awkward silence descended upon the stable.

“You know, Channing told me of your suggestion involving music and instruments. That was quite a brilliant idea!” King Albion said brightly.

Content since Channing had backed up with his father, Lis’ horse went back to sampling her hay. Lis patted her neck, then slipped from the stall to join the royals in the aisle. “It was an ignorant suggestion—Channing was able to make a much better plan off it,” she said.

King Albion shook his head. “Nay—it was an insightful idea. We never would have seen our country’s instruments and music as being particularly special or skilled, and it’s an easier

feat to strive for than some of our other ideas. You have a good head on your shoulders, and you are skilled at the sword as well!" He smiled, as if this were a highly sought-after accomplishment women frequently strived for.

"Thank you?" Lis said, unsure what point the king was driving towards.

Channing bowed his head once in acknowledgement.

Before Lis could try to change the subject, the king continued. "I am thankful you have come here. With the strength of your character, you have done more than you know for us. You have breathed valiance back into these halls, Lisheva. Truly, you do represent nobility at its finest." His face was as serious and chiseled as Channing's as he met her gaze with unwavering eyes.

Lis hesitated. "I'm just a warrior. A *mercenary*."

King Albion smiled. "Your character is what decides who you are, Lisheva, *not* your station. Verily, you are a *true* noble."

The words seemed almost like a blessing. Though Lis wanted to scoff at the absurdity of the idea, she couldn't find words to speak, for the king's observation warmed her heart more than she cared to admit.

"Well, then!" the king clapped his hands twice. "I was sent out to retrieve the two of you by my dear Queen Theodora and the charming Vorah! Theodora thought it would be nice to have tea together. I agreed only because Cook made custard tarts and fruit trifle!" He winked, then marched back up the aisleway, making horses snort and lift their heads to watch as he passed by. "Come along, you two!"

Reluctantly, Lis followed the king. Channing caught up to her quickly, then matched his stride with hers so he did not outpace her.

Lis kept her expression stoic as their shoulders brushed, eliciting a warmth she frankly did not want to admit. *Vorah is right. The Torrens Royal Family is certainly insane—and unfortunately cunning.*

CHAPTER 8

The following night, during her hours on watch, Lis sat at the little desk pressed into the corner of the room and stared at their contract by the light of an oil lamp.

The informant still had not been found, and King Albion had formally asked Lis and Vorah to stay until he or she was ferreted out.

Though Lis was glad to stay—for the pay was nice, and she was also eager to see the informant brought to justice—the identity of the betrayer was an itch she could not scratch. She sighed and rested her hands on the braided bun she had pulled her hair back into.

None of this could happen unless this informant was considered a trusted servant…but the royal family's people seem incredibly loyal.

Lis thought she heard something in the hallway. Curious, she pushed away from the desk and turned thoughtfully to look at their door.

All was quiet, until something slammed into the door.

Lis ripped her sword from its scabbard as Vorah bolted upright.

"Not going for subtlety, are they?" Vorah asked as she hopped out of her bed, fully dressed, and whipped out her daggers.

Another hit to the door made the lock jingle and the door groan.

"It seems they've decided strength over secrecy," Lis said grimly.

One last crack, and their bedroom door splintered, swinging open. Four men holding what appeared to be something like a miniature battering ram dropped their burden and swept inside, though more filled the hallway.

One with a spear engaged Vorah while two intruders who wielded short swords ran across the room, making for Lis.

This left the last bandit, who wore a hood and a dark mask that covered most of his face, to sprint over to Lis' mattress.

"Guards!" Lis shouted as she ducked a bandit's sword and parried the other's stab at her gut.

Vorah swore as the unhindered bandit kicked Lis' mattress off the wooden bedframe and picked up the leather pouch secured there.

Vorah tried to throw one of her daggers at the fleeing bandit, but the one with the spear wrapped his weapon up in the chain of her daggers and pulled, nearly yanking her off her feet.

"Guards!" Lis shouted again when the thief rejoined with those standing in the hallway. She headbutted one of her attackers—making him go down with a shout—then blocked the other with her metal arm bracer.

Though the force of the blow rattled her arm and sent pain spiraling all the way to her shoulder, it let her throw his sword off and fling his arms wide.

She slammed the hilt of her sword into his chin, making him choke and fall like a tree, just as Vorah lost her temper and dropped her daggers to deliver a roundhouse kick to her opponent's face.

Vorah leaped into the hallway, and Lis was moments behind her.

"They went this way!" Vorah sprinted up the hallway, skidding to a stop when they nearly crashed with Channing and a group of armed guards at a hallway intersection.

"Bandits," Lis said as succinctly as possible. "Three in our room—a whole party of them got away."

"Do they have the Pea?" Channing asked.

Before Lis could answer, Vorah turned down one of the side hallways. "I'll see if I can follow the leader's trail! Lis—meet you at the gates. That was a large group waiting in the hallway. With that many, they *had* to have come through the gates!"

Lis nodded, then ran for the stairs that would cut the fastest path to the front courtyard. Channing shouted directions to the guards before he raced after her.

“What happened?” he asked.

“They rammed down our door—broke it. Four of them entered our room.” Lis reached the stairs and jumped down them—taking two steps at a time. “Others waited in the hallway—we couldn’t see how many.”

“And?” Channing prodded.

“Two attacked me; one went after Vorah. The other thief got to my mattress,” Lis said when they hit the bottom of the staircase.

Channing swore. “Then they have the Pea.”

“Well—” Lis started to reply, but fell silent, straining her ears to listen when she and Channing bolted from the castle, emerging at the side.

Guards were shouting, and the scream of whistles pierced the air as they altered their course, making for the city gates.

Despite all the shouting, the gates were wide open. As they ran closer, Lis could see the sprawled form of four guards, splayed on the ground.

Lis crouched next to one of the soldiers while Channing worked to wrench the gates shut. “They’re unconscious,” she said as she rolled each guard over, searching for wounds. She pried one guard’s mouth open and sniffed, choking on the rancid scent of his breath. “If I had to guess, I’d think someone gave them laced drinks.”

“Wonderful,” Channing muttered.

“Halt!” a guard shouted.

Lis stood and reclaimed her sword. “Here they come!”

Channing unsheathed his sword as well and moved so he stood shoulder-to-shoulder with her. Together they waited, tensed and ready for the inescapable battle.

A squad of guards chased ten bandits from the castle.

It was hard to make out their exact features with only the moon and flickering torches to light the courtyard, but none of

them wore the mask donned by the bandit who had plucked the pouch from her mattress.

He might be the leader of the whole ring—or perhaps the informant. He's the one we need to catch if we want to end this… But we need to find him!

Channing raced forward, attacking the first bandit of the group. Some of the soldiers caught up with the stragglers, and though Lis moved forward to watch Channing's back, she didn't try to engage the other rogues.

Instead, she watched carefully, looking for the leader.

The shattering of glass drew her attention back to the castle. She turned just in time to see the masked man leaping through a broken window on the second story of the palace. He dropped down to a sharply angled overhang that jutted out into a flower garden and tumbled over the side, barely righting himself at the last moment so he landed on his feet and not his back.

Lis started running.

A few seconds later, Vorah popped out of the castle, jumping through the same window and sliding down the angled overhang with more swift grace than the bandit. "Catch him, Lis!" Vorah shouted as she wrapped her hands around one of the pillars that supported the overhang and slid down it.

He's slightly favoring his right side, she observed as the bandit unsheathed a sword and roared at her. *And while he holds the sword correctly, he's doing a terrible job of running with it. So, someone who was trained, but hasn't seen much real combat?*

"Move—or your blood will be shed!" the bandit snarled.

Lis ignored the threat and instead jumped into the air, swinging her sword down at the bandit.

He tried to run around her, but Lis twisted midair, following his path and limiting his choice to either defending or receiving a nasty shoulder wound.

Their blades clashed with a metallic clang.

Lis leaned into her sword so it skidded across the bandit leader's blade until her hilt guard caught on it. Then she

wrenched her sword up and in a horizontal swipe that *just* missed slicing the bandit's throat.

He wildly pushed up on his sword, dragging both of their blades above their heads.

Lis lashed out, kicking him in the gut with her knee.

He fell down, but two of his men scrambled forward, attacking Lis before she could continue.

They both wielded short swords and attacked her with such speed she could only parry and was forced to back up under the onslaught. One circled round to her back while the other continued to push her from the front, jabbing at her shoulder and stabbing at her gut.

When she heard the bandit behind her move, she dropped to the ground, avoiding a stab that instead nearly impaled his brethren.

Lis kicked the back-stabbing bandit's legs out from under him—making him tumble with a yelp.

As she rose, she grabbed a handful of dust and flung it at the other bandit's face. He raised his arm to his eyes and staggered, but his grip on his sword went lax.

Lis rapped his knuckles with the flat of her blade, making him drop his sword all together, then kicked the weapon away. Finally, she crouched down and rammed her shoulder into his gut, making him flip over her shoulder.

Unhindered, she ran after the bandit leader—who was once again running for the gate.

Pouring on the speed, just as they reached the gatehouse, Lis managed to reach out and grasp the back of the bandit leader's hood.

She yanked on it, sliding it off his head, but more importantly pulling him to a choking stop as the fasteners of his hood dug into his throat.

The bandit leader spun around and lunged at her with a dagger pointed to her gut.

Lis leaped back and raised her sword into a guard position. The dagger bounced harmlessly off her blade, and the bandit

leader cursed.

Pushing her advantage, Lis darted forward. She struck him across the chest—which opened no wound as he wore a leather chestplate—but her sword thumped him with the force of a hammer, rattling his bones.

Flinging his arm out, the bandit leader stabbed his dagger at her throat in a move she easily avoided.

Twirling her sword, Lis smacked his hand, making him drop his dagger, then viciously ground her heel onto his foot.

The attack made the bandit leader stagger backwards—ramming into the gates. Another strike to his chest and he sagged, gurgling as he slid down the length of the gate.

Finally! Lis allowed herself a smile as she minutely relaxed and stepped forward to apprehend the man.

Somewhere behind Lis, a bandit roared.

She started to whirl around, but already she knew she was too slow.

Bracing herself for the blow, she saw—out of the corner of her eye—a bandit swinging his sword in a nasty diagonal slice that was going to land on her side. She gritted her teeth and futilely attempted to pull her sword around in time.

Just as the bandit lashed out, a thrown dagger whipped through the air and struck him in the shoulder, making him collapse with a shout.

Lis followed the trajectory, and her eyes met Channing's. She nodded in thanks, then turned back around to the bandit leader—who had again struggled to his feet.

Mercilessly Lis jabbed the hilt of her sword into his throat, once again choking him.

The bandit leader fell in a heap, and Lis carefully held her sword as she bodily maneuvered the rogue so he was on his knees, and she held his arms behind his back.

"Well done, Master!" Vorah praised as she loped across the courtyard.

"Seize these men." King Albion boomed as he swept out of the castle—a platoon of guards at his back.

“Sure thing.” Vorah skidded to a stop at Lis’ side just as Channing joined her. “But I want to see who this blackguard is.”

“Of course.” King Albion strode across the courtyard, picking his way around the subdued bandits. “Channing, if you would?”

Channing nodded and pulled off the bandit leader’s black mask. His eyebrows formed a sharp V as he stared down at the unmasked man. “*Haywood*?”

Haywood’s usually charming and handsome face was rendered nearly unrecognizable as he snarled at Channing. He tried to lunge for the prince, but Lis had too good of a grasp on him and held him fast.

Channing shook his head. “I never would have guessed…”

“Which is probably why he evaded capture for so long,” Vorah said.

“Haywood,” King Albion’s voice was strong but sad. “Why did you choose to betray our family?”

“Does the reason for the betrayal really matter?” Lis asked. “Money, power, greed…all it means is that he values other things above his honor and loyalty.”

“But if he has a reason—if he needed aid in some way,” the king started.

Haywood interrupted him with sharp laughter. “As usual, you are soft to the bone, *Your Majesty*,” he scoffed.

“Is that really something you want to say to the man who is going to decide upon your punishment?” Vorah asked skeptically.

“It doesn’t matter,” Haywood shook his head. “I am a dead man, for I have failed in my mission and was caught.”

Lis narrowed her eyes. “Then you work for someone?”

“I retrieve items and artifacts for those who have *real* power, for those who will *properly* use them for the purpose they were designed for: dominance,” Haywood snarled.

The hair on the back of Lis’ head raised. She wanted to toss her head like a horse and stamp out the ugliness of the words.

“The Pea of Primeorder is dangerous,” King Albion said.

“It’s a tool. One that *should* be wielded. One that will be used when the time comes,” Haywood promised.

“In case you haven’t noticed, traitor, you’ve been captured,” Vorah pointed out.

“I have, but the Pea of Primeorder is not on my person.” Haywood smirked and tried to lean back, until he felt the edge of Lis’ sword at his spine and hastily leaned forward again. “You’ll never find it. Search me all you like! I hid it when I split off from my men. Whether you imprison me or kill me, I’ll get word to my men and *someone* will retrieve it from its secret place.”

“Unlikely,” Lis said.

Haywood growled and tried—and failed—to pull himself from her grasp. “You think once you’re gone, Warrior Princess, that they will be able to keep the castle so well guarded—when they never even suspected *me*?”

“None of that matters—you hiding the pouch from my room is irrelevant,” Lis said.

Haywood violently shook his head. “You think you can find it? I know this castle better than anyone! I hid the Pea of Primeorder well!”

“You didn’t hide the Pea. You hid a rock,” Lis said dryly.

Everyone—except Vorah, of course—turned to stare at Lis. “What did you say?” Channing finally asked.

“Obviously Haywood never opened the pouch,” Lis said. “All that was in it was a pebble of the approximate weight and size of the Pea of Primeorder. Vorah and I swapped it out after *Apex* attempted to steal it, when we knew our defensive measures were being leaked.” Lis forced herself not to look at Channing as she explained their decision.

“It was such a splendid trap. And you walked right into it!” Vorah gleefully clapped her hands.

“If the Pea wasn’t under your mattress, where is it?” King Albion asked.

Lis glanced at Vorah, who nodded and moved to take over holding Haywood.

This freed Lis to slide her sword into her scabbard and reach up into the orderly bun of her hair. She had to maneuver around the leather tie and pins she used to keep her hair up, but eventually pushed back her locks and pulled out the Pea of Primeorder from the nestle of her hair.

King Albion's jaw dropped, and even Channing stared dumbly as Lis held the Pea up so the light of the flickering torches made the jewel shimmer.

"You slept with an ancient and powerful magic item woven into your hair?" Channing asked.

Lis shrugged. "In the end, it's just a jewel. It made sleep somewhat uncomfortable, but that was not due to its power, but more because I was sleeping with a rock pressing into my skull."

"No—it, it can't be!" Haywood stared up at the jewel, aghast. "I grabbed it—with my own hands!"

Lis raised an eyebrow. "I find it amusing that *you*—a betrayer—would assume that everyone else should act with the honor and open manners that you lack."

Haywood's shock turned to rage as he tried to get off his knees. "They'll kill you!" he snarled. "You have dabbled in something darker than you know, and you will *pay* for keeping the jewel from them! They will come for you!"

Lis smiled coldly as she rested her hand on the hilt of her sword. "Oh? The cowardly, depraved people you work for will try to fight *me*?" She leaned over him, and her smile grew. "Good. It will save me the trouble of tracking them down to take care of them myself."

"You, you *witch*!" he shouted.

Channing swung his sword so the edge pressed against Haywood's throat. "Choose your words *carefully*, Haywood. For though my father is a forgiving man, I am not nearly so noble."

Haywood finally fell mute and miserably hung his head.

Lis waited for a moment to make certain he was done shouting, then turned on her heels and bowed to King Albion as she offered out the gem. "With the bandit leader—and

informant—caught, I believe there is no longer need of the remaining days of our contract. I give the jewel back over to you, Your Majesty."

Channing shook his head. "Word of the jewel is still spreading," he argued. "It needs to be protected."

"Fear not, my boy." King Albion scooped up the jewel from Lis' hand and gave his son a sly smile. "I think I know *just* the place for it—where it will be forever safe and secure."

Channing clenched his hands into fists. "But Father…"

The king leaned over to murmur to his son in a tone Lis was fairly certain she wasn't supposed to hear. "You cannot hide behind the jewel any longer, Channing. She deserves that much. Step out in courage and trust yourself *and* her." He smacked his son on the back with a smile, then turned to address the soldiers.

"Arrest them. We must question them all to make certain there are no other informants in our castle. But know tonight, men, you have made your country proud!" When King Albion raised a fist, the soldiers cheered. As he strode back to the castle, the guards scurried around like ants, securing the would-be thieves and beginning the trek to the dungeon.

Vorah happily passed Haywood off to a pair of soldiers, then rested her hands on her hips. "That was an exciting evening—but very satisfying!"

"It's finally over." Lis rubbed her neck as she tried to determine how she felt about it.

"The worst has passed," Channing acknowledged. He slid his sword back into its scabbard as he watched the soldiers march the bandits towards the castle. "With Haywood uncovered, we should be able to find the other informants—if there are any—and I believe we will have successfully shut down his bandit ring. Though his betrayal will grieve my parents."

"It was a surprise," Vorah agreed. "He was always so friendly and attentive. But Lis outsmarted him!"

Lis shrugged. "I took precautionary measures that paid off."

“I know humility is supposed to be considered a good trait, but sometimes I think you have rather too much of it, Lis,” Vorah complained. She shook her head as she adjusted the chain of her daggers. “I’m going to follow the soldiers—I wouldn’t put it past Haywood to try to escape—and then I’m going to clean my gear. I assume you are up for the day, Master?”

Lis exhaled heavily through her nose at the title.

“That would be a yes!” Vorah said cheerfully. She grinned at the pair as she sauntered off, her red hair glowing in the dim light. “Good luck, *Prince Charming*! You’re going to need it!” She cackled as she followed behind the soldiers dragging Haywood, jingling the chain of her daggers for good measure.

Lis flexed her fingers and rubbed her palm as she watched the last of the soldiers—and bandits—disappear into the castle.

“Though I am glad we caught the information leak… Haywood’s words implied this is bigger than Torrens, didn’t they?”

Channing shrugged. “Who can say? We will continue to be on our guard, but for now it is enough to track down those who turned Haywood.” He glanced in her direction. “We captured him, and you guarded the gem. We cannot let the reveal of Haywood’s character and the possibilities of a grim future ruin our celebration in what we have accomplished tonight.”

Lis cracked a smile. “Thank you for your help. I couldn’t have avoided that attack.”

Channing bowed slightly. “It was my honor. Thank you for all you have done—for my family and for Torrens.”

“Of course.” She waited a moment longer, but Channing stared at his feet and seemed to be finished speaking. Nodding in acknowledgement, she started for the palace.

“Lis,” Channing called. “Please, wait.”

Lis turned back around. “Yes?”

Channing prowled back and forth in front of her, his footsteps quiet and stealthy.

Lis watched him curiously. When she shifted to put more of her weight on her right foot, Channing stopped directly in front of her and stared at her.

His golden eyes glittered, but the slight furrow of his brows and the determined set of his jaw spoke of worry and resolve. He swallowed sharply, then blurted out, “I love you.”

Lis stared at him, stunned. *I know he says all matter of strange things, but—*

“I am sorry for dragging you here, for mixing you into this business with Haywood, but I can’t find it in me to really regret it, for I don’t think I would have had the courage to interact with you any other way.” He ran a hand through his russet brown hair and shook his head, then once again raised his gaze to meet hers. “I hope you stay—I *want* you to stay.”

“Channing, I’m not a rich princess. I’m not even aristocracy. I’m not ‘accomplished.’ I’m not book smart. I can tell you how to fight a man, but that’s not what you need in a princess. I can’t help Torrens—I won’t be a good wife,” Lis said.

“Don’t you see what you’ve done already?” Channing asked. “Through your honor and thoughtfulness, you pointed out what a hypocrite I’ve been with my actions and how we can change Torrens. You caught Haywood; you saved the Pea—and you did not fear it! Lis, I don’t *want* a rich wife or someone schooled—and Torrens does not need that either!.... I just want you.” He finished in a voice that was barely above a whisper. “I don’t *need* anything from you, but I’m hoping you can love me.”

Lis bit her lip and folded her hands behind her back in hopes that Channing would not notice how they shook.

“I know it has been only a few weeks since you met me,” Channing said. “It seems sudden, but wherever I traveled as Apex, I listened for news of you, and I watched you. I’m aware it’s not the same for you, and it might take time before you come to care for me the same way.”

Lis nodded and a hiccup of a laugh escaped her. “But I do.”

Channing blinked. “You do?”

Lis glanced at the sky and couldn't help but think Vorah was probably laughing her guts out somewhere in the castle. "Yes," she said. "Because you don't fight for me—or on my behalf. You fight *with* me."

"Then…?"

"I'll stay," Lis said.

Channing stepped closer to her, so close, in fact, that she could feel the warmth he radiated and smell the faint scent of cedar that lingered on his clothes.

Everything in the world stilled as his golden eyes glowed and he lowered his head. "Lisheva," he whispered, his lips on hers.

Lis leaned into Channing as he slid his arms around her and she gripped the collar of his cloak. Her heart thumped in her throat as she tasted the sweetest moment in her life.

She had spilled her blood for others, had devoted her life to fighting nobly and honorably, to helping those in need, no matter what pain it would bring her. And Channing *loved* her for that.

His warm embrace and their shared kiss…it filled Lis with life and simultaneously made her realize what she had *really* fought for all this time.

Channing finally pulled back, and Lis leaned into his shoulder.

"I want you to know, my parents approve." He pressed his lips to her temple and rubbed her back with one hand.

"That's good. You're still going to have to ask Vorah for permission," Lis said.

"I thought that might happen," Channing said. "I have taken the liberty of ordering her a complete knight set of armor."

Lis laughed. "No wonder you could handle being Apex."

A slight smile curled the edges of Channing's mouth. His lips brushed her ears as he whispered, "Only for those I love and hold dear."

"And that includes me?" Lis asked.

Channing chuckled—that deep throaty sound Lis had come to love. “Naturally—only *you* are capable of catching such a legendary thief.”

Lis snorted. “That’s a bit—”

Channing kissed her again before she could finish.

And so, the thief-of-a-prince and a warrior princess fell in love, all because of a pea.

EPILOGUE

Months later, Lis spent the morning of her wedding obsessively polishing her sword. Over an hour ago, she had cleaned it to a beautiful gleam, now she was approaching the territory of accidentally blinding herself or her opponent with the shine of her blade. Still, she cleaned.

Across the room, her wedding gown—a cream-and-gold creation with gauzy sleeves and a train long enough Lis could comfortably use it to strangle someone—spilled out of her armoire.

Lis loved her dress. It had a matching gold belt *and* a small dagger! But at the moment, the very sight of it made her stomach roll.

Can this really work? My nickname might be Warrior Princess, but I don't know how to rule! I'm not even from Torrens!

Her thoughts turned darker and darker, and she almost missed the sound of Vorah clomping down the hallway.

"Master!" Vorah shouted through the door. "We're coming in!"

Lis finally set her sword aside and smiled nervously as Vorah—wearing a beautiful blue, Torrens-style dress—swept inside the room. Queen Theodora was behind her, carrying a covered object on a pillow.

"Congratulations on this special day, Lisheva." Queen Theodora set the pillow down on a sideboard with a smile.

"Yes, well done on bagging a prince." Vorah winked before she threw her arms around Lis in a hug. "Now, why aren't you dressed, and why do you look as if you're being dragged before court?"

Lis shook her head slightly and glanced at her wedding gown. "It's nothing. I just needed to clean my sword. Can't have

a dirty sword."

Vorah and Queen Theodora exchanged glances.

"Lisheva," Queen Theodora said as she once again picked up the pillow. "I have a gift for you—from the royal family and Torrens itself. Normally, this would not be given to you until you are officially crowned after your wedding ceremony, but I thought we ought to make an exception given what it stands for."

Queen Theodora tugged the silken cloth off the pillow, revealing a delicately crafted—and beautiful—crown. "This marks you as the royal you are; not because you married Channing, nor because my husband and I declare you so, but because of what you have done. See?"

The queen set the crown in Lis' hands and turned it so the front of the crown faced Lis, revealing the thumbnail-sized, green jewel at the center of the crown.

Lis blinked. "The Pea of Primeorder?"

"You're the only one strong enough to protect it, Master," Vorah grinned.

Queen Theodora nodded in consent. "You have proven yourself, Lisheva. Through your strength of character, your desire to protect, and the honor you live by. You are a *true* princess." Queen Theodora smiled and set her hand on Lis shoulder.

"When my son and husband came up with their idiotic idea to send for you and then attempt to steal the Pea of Primeorder from you, I agreed. Not because I believed Channing would succeed—I still cannot believe he truly thought he would be able to best the two of you even after he had spied on you no less than a dozen times—but because I knew Channing admired you and very likely loved you already even though he was too shy to speak a word of it."

Lis brushed the Pea of Primeorder with her thumb and listened as Queen Theodora continued.

"Channing had told me of your many escapades. How even though many might call you a mercenary, you were far more

noble and honorable. You would fight for those who didn't have much money and would refuse a contract if it was ignoble or hurt someone. It was your character that made me eager to bring you here. For you could gather a hundred of the gentlest daughters of nobility and princesses with the bluest blood, and I know *none* of them would be worthy to stand in your place, for none of them would possess even half of your heart and spirit."

Queen Theodora placed her hands under Lis' chin and tilted her head up. "Trust yourself, dear one. Trust in Channing's judgement, and see yourself for who you really are: a beautiful, noble, warrior princess."

Tears stung Lis' eyes, and she swallowed sharply as she raised her eyes from the crown. "Thank you."

"There is no need to thank me. Indeed, it is I who should be thanking you—and Vorah as well." The queen smiled at the fiery-haired female warrior.

Vorah grinned as she leaned against Lis' chair and placed her hand on her shoulder. "Are you ready to put on your dress, now?"

Lis nodded. "I am."

Vorah knelt at her side and hugged her again. "Congratulations, my friend. I can't wait for this next leg of our journey!"

Lis couldn't stop smiling as she whispered, "Me, either."

"I HEARD the christening of Princess Rosalinda was ruined by a rogue mage," Lis said as she settled into a settee. She was careful to sit on the edge so her sword didn't stick out awkwardly. (What was the point of having a specially designed overcoat that resembled a dress *and* effectively hid her weapon, just to reveal it with poor posture?)

“You heard of that?” Lord Enchanter Evariste—a famous magic user who had made his home in Torrens—asked as he picked up a teacup painted with red roses. “The Sole royal family was making an effort to hush the matter up—though I don’t believe they will succeed in hiding it for very long.”

“Lis has contacts in Sole from her days as a warrior for hire. It was they who informed her of the situation.” Channing smiled slightly as he ruffled the hair of their six-year-old adopted son, Godfrey.

Godfrey was staring at Evariste’s apprentice with huge eyes. To be fair, the girl was lovely.

Her eye color couldn’t seem to settle between blue and green, and even her hair seemed to shift from a warm honey brunette to copper in the span of a breath.

“Ahh, then you’ve heard who saved Princess Rosalinda from certain death?” Evariste asked with a bright smile.

Lis resisted snorting with laughter and instead shifted her attention to the enchanter’s apprentice. “Indeed, I did hear. You were very brave and did a wonderful job in turning Rosalinda’s curse of death into a curse of sleep, Apprentice Angelique.”

“Indeed! Angelique did extraordinarily well. Her use of her magic was admirable,” Evariste declared.

Angelique had been smiling—which only amplified her beauty—but at Evariste’s mention of her magic, she turned slightly green.

“I was only able to counter the curse because of the guidance of Master Evariste,” Angelique said in a voice that was surprisingly husky but as melodic as a harp.

Evariste waggled a finger at his apprentice. “I wouldn’t have been able to lead you through it if you didn’t have the skill.”

Lis smothered another smile as she placed a treacle tart on Godfrey’s plate.

Evariste was only slightly older than Angelique, for he had earned the rank of Lord Enchanter at an astonishingly young age due to the strength of his magic and his genius-like ability in using it. Privately, Lis had always wondered if the exalted

state had robbed the Enchanter of true joy, at least until he took Angelique on as his apprentice.

The beautiful girl—who had the appearance of a sweet and gentle noble lady but often reminded Lis of herself—made Evariste laugh as Lis had never heard before.

“Thank you, Mama,” Godfrey whispered to Lis when he took his plate back.

Lis heart swelled with love for her adopted son as he smiled up at her, his eyes bright. “Don’t eat too many sweets,” she reminded him. “You have your sword lessons next, and riding with Vorah after that.”

“Will you finally teach me how to roll with a sword today, Mama?” Godfrey asked.

“Perhaps Papa can teach you later. He would be the better teacher,” Lis said with some dismay. (No matter how she trained with Channing, she still couldn’t roll with such liquid and fluid grace as he.)

Before Godfrey could voice his disappointment, Channing shook his head and spoke, drawing Lis back into the conversation.

“While Apprentice Angelique deserves every accolade, it bothers me that the rogue mage was even able to cast such a spell. I thought rogue mages have their magic sealed before they are exiled from the Veneno Conclave,” Channing said.

“That is still the custom, yes,” Evariste agreed. “But it seems Carabosso found a way to reverse the act, or it was improperly preformed upon him.”

Channing flattened his lips. “It seems to be a dire warning.”

“I agree with you, Your Highness,” Evariste said. “It does not bode well for the Continent.”

“As long as we live in Torrens,” Angelique said, her eyes flickering from the open window where they could hear laughter to young Godfrey, obliviously consuming his treat, “we will not allow such things to happen here.”

The sweet, naive blue in the enchantress-in-training’s eyes briefly bled away to reveal something as solid as silver and

sharp as a sword.

Lis blinked in surprise, and in that instant Angelique's sweet expression returned.

"I hope your promise proves to be unnecessary, Apprentice Angelique." Lis set her teacup down and briefly rested her fingers on the fabric that hid her sword. "But I thank you for your words, and for your protection."

Channing nodded in agreement.

Silence ensued for a moment, before Lis racked her mind for a new conversation topic. "How long do you expect to remain at home in Torrens? The two of you are always so busy traveling for Conclave business."

"It seems we will be able to winter here—which I look forward to," Evariste said. "Though Angelique's pet cat does love to complain over the snow."

"Master Roland, yes?" Lis asked, faintly recalling the last time she had visited the magic users in their home and met the magic, talking cat Evariste had given his apprentice as a pet.

"Yes," Angelique confirmed. "He—"

The salon doors were flung open, and Vorah stormed inside. "Lis—one of the guards spotted an Arcainian river pirate at the market. You coming?"

Lis was already standing. "If you'll excuse me, Lord Enchanter Evariste, Apprentice Angelique." She winked at Godfrey and considered kicking Channing when he also stood and tugged the laces of her full-length jacket loose for her.

"Be careful," he said.

"For you, I will," Lis assured him. She kissed him on the cheek, then strode to the door, shedding her coat, revealing her tight-fitting trousers, boots, and white linen shirt.

"If you're not back in half an hour, I'm coming after you," Channing called out in warning.

"Hurting for a fight are you?" Vorah asked.

Channing pressed his lips together and started to pull a dagger from his belt.

Lis grabbed Vorah by the collar of her shirt and dragged her into the hallway. “We’ll need chain mail?” she asked.

“Stable boys have it out by our mares.” Vorah slung her arm over Lis’ shoulder. “Come, Your Royalness. We’ve got a pirate to bag!”

Lis laughed and couldn’t help but recall how unsuitable she had thought she was for Channing. As she and Vorah started to jog, they turned down a hallway where her crown—and Channing’s—were out on display, guarded by a squadron of soldiers.

At the center of her crown, the Pea of Primeorder still glowed in its place of honor, a testament not just to Torrens, but to Lis herself, that she—an ex-mercenary—was a *true princess*.

THE END

THE PRINCESS and the Pea is a prequel to Timeless Fairy Tales, a series of stand-alone stories that can be read in any order, although the events of each book will provide glimpses of the bigger picture. To see a sample of the first book, Beauty and the Beast, keep reading!

TIMELESS FAIRY TALES: BEAUTY AND THE BEAST EXCERPT

Once Upon a Time

PRINCE SEVERIN HAPPENED to be pacing in the little hall when the stained-glass skylight shattered, and a young woman fell through the ceiling with the broken glass. She dropped like a twisting cat and landed with an ominous crack.

The handful of chateau servants that had been hovering around him slapped their hands to their masked faces, their mouths dropping open in screams that couldn't tear loose from their throats.

Severin flexed his paw-like hands, drawing his claws as the servants scurried towards the girl.

A footman and one of the grooms reached her first. She was passably pretty, but plain, wearing the muted colors of a villager. Her breathing was ragged, and her face tight with pain. The groom tried to roll her onto her side.

"*No*!" she screamed.

The footman and groom leapt backwards, and Severin tilted his head. *She is conscious? After such a fall?*

The young lady opened her eyes and clutched her cloak close to her body with shaking hands. She shed not a single tear, but clenched her jaw with snarling determination.

Severin glared up at the broken skylight—where night lurked like a pool of black ink—then at the fallen girl. *What was she doing on the roof?* Fearing the answer, Severin stalked across the little hall as the groom inched back to her side and

extended a cautious hand to her skirt, intending to remove bits of glass from the cloth.

"Don't," the young lady whispered. "My leg—" she broke off, hissing in pain.

The groom turned helplessly to Severin, who, though he was now in a better position to defend his servants, kept to the shadows. Severin shrugged.

The footman signaled a chamber maid, probably sending her to fetch Duval, the staff physician.

Prowling just out of the intruder's sight, Severin watched the groom scoot around the girl's body, brushing glass away as her breathing came in pained but steady gasps.

She resembles a peasant, but even the most foolhardy villagers venture only as far as the gardens. Did she intend to attack my servants…or me? Severin traced her long, lean body, looking for tell-tale bulges. *She isn't carrying any weapons.*

When he realized the footman and groom were staring expectantly at him, Severin said, "Duval may see to her, then send her on her way."

The footman hesitated and pointed to the skylight, then a hall door. He lifted his hands in a plea.

Severin almost snorted. *I will never fathom how all my staff came to be such bleeding hearts given all we have lived through.* "I do not care if it is late. She shouldn't have been skulking around the castle."

The groom stood and waited until he had Severin's attention, then gestured at the intruder's leg.

Severin's instinct was to growl in impatience, but he refrained, disliking how feral it sounded. "Fine. Put her in a bedroom for tonight. She leaves at dawn." He would have to order a footman or two to keep an eye on the unwanted visitor. Though he doubted she would be climbing roofs again anytime soon, she still posed a threat. Not to him. Heavens knew he could defend himself too easily in this form, but his servants were perfect targets, and he would not risk their safety.

The groom bowed and happily returned to brushing glass away from the intruder/guest. He tried to extract a shard of red glass from under her cloak and accidentally nudged her leg.

The girl screamed. It was a howl of pain squeezed from her heart. “My leg.” She clenched her eyes shut and threw her arms wide.

The shriek made his ears ring, and Severin stifled a wince. “Shut her up and move her. Immediately.”

The groom almost fell as he scrambled up to Severin like a frightened colt. He frantically slapped his arm and pointed to the girl.

Severin sniffed the air, but he need not have bothered. Even in the dim torchlight, he could see the blood spilling from lacerations on the girl’s arms. He growled and stalked to the injured intruder, entering the ring of torchlight.

The girl opened her eyes as he drew closer. She saw him, and her mouth opened, but nothing came out. Her terror filled the air with a sharp scent, and her whole body trembled.

Severin knew he was frightening to behold. He was, after all, a beast with the head of a black cat.

Teeth that were too big for his mouth poked out of his lips, and his fingernails were more like claws. He had always been broad shouldered, but it was to an extreme now—like a massive dog—and his legs were like the hind legs of a cat. Instead of bending forward on knees, his legs curved back and gave him a swaying gait. He was covered in black fur, making him even more fiendish looking.

Severin ignored the girl’s unusual silence—most folk screamed when they first saw him—and picked her up with ease.

Sound finally ripped through the girl’s terror. She howled as he carried her—jostling her leg. For a split second her eyes—as green as spring—met his. His eyes, he knew, were the worst part of his transformation. They were amber, his pupils slitted like those of a mindless beast.

He noted with disinterest that her gaze didn't fester with fear, but boiled with hatred—another emotion he was used to seeing. The moment passed. Her eyes rolled back, and she fainted.

He stifled another growl. This was exactly why Severin had exiled himself to Chanceux Chateau. The reactions people gave when first seeing him were like daggers to the back, although he had experienced those with significantly less pain.

He glanced up at the hole punched through his ceiling. "It's a surprise she's alive." He left the little hall, his nails clicking on the floor as his servants scurried around him like fleas.

ONCE UPON A TIME, a handsome prince was cursed by an evil witch.

No.

Once upon a time, an illegitimate prince—the son of the king—was sentenced to insanity by a wicked witch and was rescued from the curse by a beautiful enchantress.

The fairy tale was a stark reality for those connected to the crown of Loire. To everyone else it was a fable, a tale told to teach children morals. Elle had fallen straight into the fairy tale.

The pain woke her like a starved animal.

Keeping her eyes closed, Elle organized her scattered thoughts. She remembered chasing after the villagers who poked around the castle and stomped through the gardens. She'd followed them out of the rose garden and leapt from one piece of the castle's sloping roof to the next. But it was black, and Elle miscalculated her landing. Instead of hitting shingles, she hit glass and plummeted straight through. She didn't recall much after that besides pain and beastly amber-colored eyes.

Someone touched her leg, and Elle didn't stifle the groan in time.

When she peeled her eyes open, she observed three masked people gathered in the room: a woman who stood by a fireplace; a second woman posted at the door; and a man, who nodded at her bare leg.

The bedroom was posh, better than any room Elle had ever stayed in. It smelled woodsy, probably from the pile of herb roots the man grated into a wooden bowl and stirred.

Her eyes flickered to the bandages wrapped around her arms, and she raised her eyebrows. She had half expected to wake up in a dungeon. Everyone on the continent knew Prince Severin was a brutal, suspicious man, even before he had been cursed. She curled her fingers into fists.

The gesture drew the masked-man's attention, and he straightened up and smiled at her, giving her the chance to see his face—or what little of it wasn't hidden. A black mask edged in blue covered his forehead, swooped down over his nose and cut off just above his lips, running across his cheeks. It was too dark to see what color his eyes were, but he smelled like the herbs in his concoction.

The man hefted a slate in the air, holding it steady for inspection.

You broke your left leg when you fell. I already set it with some aid. I am preparing a pack of comfrey herb.

Elle stared at the words for a moment, keeping her expression impassive even though she wanted to scream. A broken leg. Now? *I'm doomed. If they find out who I am…* Thinking of the safest identity she could adopt in this kind of situation, that of an ignorant villager, she looked him in the eyes and lied. "I cannot read."

Her words caused the woman by the fire to tumble across the room. She threw herself in a wooden chair placed at the bedside, across from the man—who was presumably some sort of barber-surgeon. The woman behaved more like a hunting hound, eagerly wriggling in her chair, than the lady's maid she was very likely to be based on the fine cloth and elegant cut of her dress. Both she and the maid at the door wore masks

identical to the man's, although theirs were edged in the maroon shades of fine red wines.

The barber-surgeon let his mouth hang open in dismay as he looked back and forth from Elle to the slate. He wiped away the words and wrote something new on it with chalk, then showed the slate to the lady's maid and the woman by the door.

One of the women covered her mouth in a gesture of horror. The other whipped out a small slate of her own and began writing on it.

Elle briefly closed her eyes; the pain was incredible. Her leg throbbed with a fierceness she thought only torture could deliver. The cuts on her arms stung and prickled. She tried to clear her mind and think through the haze.

Elle hadn't seen the chateau staff before—she always took the night watch, when everything was quiet, and no one stirred.

The gossiping servants of Noyers—the capital of Loire and home of the royal family—said the illegitimate prince's servants had been cursed along with him. The stable boys claimed they were turned into animals, and the kitchen staff insisted the servants were invisible, but Elle put the most stock in her superior's guess. Farand said they had lost their voices and faces. Apparently, he was right.

The shush of skirts grazing the floor prodded Elle from her musings. She opened her eyes just in time to see the maid leave the room, the door closing behind her.

The remaining female servant—the one who resembled a lady's maid—perched at Elle's side with an eager smile.

Elle flicked her gaze back and forth between the lady's maid and the barber-surgeon. *Why are they acting so nice?* Using the guise of a villager, Elle thought she would attract less attention, but the servants were treating her like a pampered pet. *Why?*

The barber-surgeon began wrapping her leg in bandages that dripped with the odd-smelling sludge, making Elle gasp in pain. It was hot on her bare skin, and it oozed, but his deft hands were steady as he wrapped the bandages with practiced skill.

Elle clenched the blankets on the bed, but the barber-surgeon was gentle. He smiled sympathetically as he smoothed more bandages and sludge over her leg.

The lady's maid reached out and patted her hand, then retrieved a comb and teased Elle's black hair out of her face. The two servants worked silently. Elle's unsteady breathing and the crackling fire were the loudest sounds in the room. Though the haze of pain made her complacent, Elle waited, suspecting the real danger would begin when the maid came back.

Her suspicions were proven right when the silence was broken a few minutes later by a thunderous voice that stalked towards the room. "—makes sense she can't read. She's an unschooled peasant. That means she is an idiot."

The barber-surgeon plunged his hands in a bucket of water, hastily wiped them clean, then started scribbling on his slate. The lady's maid did the same, and both of them leapt to their feet and held their slates out when the door was nearly thrown off its hinges.

"I will *not* waste my time by acting as a translator. Although I will suffer this girl's presence in my chateau, I will not join you in cosseting her," a voice growled, and the beast entered the room.

He was a horrifying combination of cat and canine, all death and wildness—although he spoke crisply with careful enunciation. He was no less terrifying to behold now than he had been in the few woozy moments Elle was conscious after falling through the ceiling. If anything, he was more alarming, more *wrong* with his hulking body looming in the cheerful light of the fire.

The maid scurried to Prince Severin's side, but the beast waved her away as he read the slates his other servants held out to him.

The beast—the cursed, illegitimate Prince Severin—snarled in his throat, then turned to Elle, who sank low in the bed and bit the inside of her cheek to keep from snarling back. She *hated* him—and his family.

“Your leg is broken. Don’t move it or else. Duval will do whatever needs to be done. If you disrespect him, I will have you thrown from the castle, broken leg or not.” He turned on his hind legs—a movement too smooth to be human—and started for the door. The lady’s maid at Elle’s bedside knocked a stool over as she darted in front of the prince and again held her slate up.

“What is your name?” the cursed prince asked without turning around.

Elle deliberated on her answer for a moment, but hastily spoke when he started to growl. “Elle.”

“This is Emele. She will see to your needs until your leg has healed sufficiently enough for you to leave the castle.” He was out of the room before anyone else could push a slate in his direction.

The barber-surgeon—the cursed prince had called him Duval—presented a glass of liquid to Elle.

Elle sniffed it, blinking when the contents burned her eyes and nose. “Alcohol?”

Duval nodded and went back to wrapping her exposed leg.

Elle took a swig and almost coughed. The drink was potent and powerful. The whole glass would get her drunker than a villager during Christmas time. Elle winced; her leg ached. It seemed she was relatively safe, provided the chateau servants continued to champion her and Prince Severin remained as sullen as she had long estimated. She supposed being drunk was better than being conscious of the stabbing pain.

“Bottoms up.” She toasted the air and tipped the drink back.

When Elle woke from her alcohol-induced stupor, the bandaged sludge on her leg had hardened to a plaster consistency. The barber-surgeon was gone, and light leaked through the top of

the heavy, velvet curtains that covered the windows. It was daylight.

The lady's maid, Emele, sat at her bedside, stitching the seam of a blue gown.

Elle shifted, and Emele looked up to smile at her. The black mask marred Emele's face like a large inkblot on a white shirt.

"Morning." Elle pushed through the pain and again adopted the persona of a meek villager.

Emele put her work aside and then pulled back the curtains —an ocean of glorious sunlight drifted across the walls. Next, she straightened the blankets and pillows mounded around Elle.

Elle mentally rummaged through memorized accents and selected the most appropriate one. "Beggin' your pardon, uh, miss, but I've got questions 'bout my leg. Can I talk to sumone?"

Emele left the room. A bell rang, and she was back with a moist towel, which she presented to Elle.

"Oh, thanks." Elle took the damp towel and wiped off her face and hands, then carefully felt her scalp for slivers of glass. She remembered being blanketed in the jagged stuff when she first fell, but the servants must have swept it all off.

No matter; I have more important concerns. For instance, how bad is my leg? She glanced down at her plaster-encased leg, and tried moving it a hair. Pain so sharp and treacherous gnawed on her leg that she found it hard to breathe. *Well. That's not good.* Her shoulders heaved as she mastered the last shrieks of pain that fought to escape her, then cleared her throat. "Um, 'bout my—ouch."

The lady's maid began attacking Elle's hair with a comb, then tied it off with a ribbon. A bell rang again, and Emele fluttered to the door.

Elle rubbed her stinging scalp as the maid returned to the bed carrying a tray. *Why does she keep slithering out of my request?* "Say, can you—" She cut herself off as Emele placed the tray on a small end table near the bed.

The tray was laden with slices of cheese, wonderfully spiced meat pasties, turnips, and asparagus that dripped with butter.

Emele smiled and poured a cup of tea as Elle cut into the breakfast, relishing the excellent food. When she realized Emele watched her with round, curious eyes behind her mask, Elle remembered what she was pretending to be, and switched to devouring her food with gusto and a general lack of table manners. Even though Elle shoved huge chunks of turnips into her mouth, Emele seemed pleased. She brought a second tray.

When finished, Elle sipped her tea and lounged in the bed, her stomach filled for the first time in weeks. Emele settled into her chair at her bedside, reminding Elle that she still hadn't learned about her injuries.

"What I've been meanin' to ask is, what did the barber-surgeon say 'bout my leg?" She shifted and jarred her aching appendage, making her face twist in a grimace.

Emele did not respond and instead held up a slate that had the word *cheese* written on it. She picked up the plate that held a few leftover slices from breakfast and gestured to it. She then traced her finger below the word.

"Cheese?" Elle asked.

Emele nodded and set the cheese down, erased the word, and set about writing something else.

"Fabulous," Elle muttered. The lady's maid was trying to teach her how to read.

Emele proceeded to gesture her way through words and objects, managing to "teach" Elle how to pronounce letters by crawling through words and making her utter individual syllables.

The laborious process made Elle want to howl, but she was afraid to break her disguise. Even after they finished, Emele would not answer any questions about Elle's leg. But the pain was so torturous Elle was thankful when the lady's maid finally

fed her a cup of strong alcohol to kill the pain and lull her off to sleep.

When Elle woke up next, it was to the careful ministrations of Duval, the barber-surgeon. He inspected the stiff bandages, feeling her leg for additional swelling.

Unwilling to let the chance escape, Elle shoved the pain from her mind. “How long?” Her voice was crusty with sleep and the last bit of alcohol in her system.

Duval looked up.

“How long am I stuck in bed?” She swallowed, and her lungs burned with fear and apprehension.

The barber-surgeon hesitated, then he held up two fingers. He waited a few moments and then flashed three fingers.

“Twenty-three?” Elle guessed.

Duval shook his head.

“Two to three?”

Duval nodded.

“Days?”

Duval shook his head.

“*Weeks*?” Elle yelped, rocketing to an upright position.

The barber-surgeon took a step backwards and nodded.

Elle stared stupidly at her leg. Two to three *weeks*? She was supposed to report back to Farand in a week! If he thought she’d deserted her mission, her entire family would pay.

She shook her head, too stunned to do anything else. Her heart felt hollow and her ears rang. Duval gave her a comforting smile as she collapsed back into the bed.

The barber-surgeon left as Emele arrived. The lady’s maid carried a strangely shaped pillow, which she set about embroidering when she took up her customary position at Elle’s bedside.

Elle lay still for an hour then tried moving. *Just because Duval said I needed two to three weeks of rest doesn't mean I—* she bit her tongue to keep from howling. When she moved, the pain ripped brutally through her body. She could not possibly drag herself all the way to Noyers; she had to stay stationary.

She closed her eyes in an attempt to smother the tears that threatened to fall.

Emele patted Elle's hand and skirted the bed like a mother hen stuffed in a puffy pink dress. She roused Elle for tea and a reading lesson, but Elle didn't have the heart to try.

Everything I've done has been for my family…and now, because of one stupid mistake, it's going to unravel.

The story continues in Beauty and the Beast

AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading *Princess and the Pea*, I hope you enjoyed Lis' story! If you want to read more of my work, sign up for my newsletter to receive my **free** *K. M. Shea Starter Pack* ebook.

It contains:

- A *King Arthur and Her Knights* prequel short story
- A *Red Rope of Fate* prequel short story
- An original fairy tale, *Princess Snow and Queen Ruby*

My newsletter is released every month, and contains information about contests, new freebies—like short stories and extra scenes—free books, and reader opinion polls.

Thank you for your support and encouragement. I am proud to say I have the best readers. Therefore, it is my dearest wish that Lis and her friends made you laugh and warmed your heart. Thank you.

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